

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

More than a campus battle

The presidency of Mexico's most prestigious university is up for grabs.

The question of who will succeed to the post of rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has become one of the main items of backroom conversation over the past weeks. The post does not actually fall vacant until January, but the successor to Dr. Guillermo Soberón Acevedo is likely to be selected by the Academic Council of the university some months before, and the scramble is on.

Such intense interest in the matter may seem strange to readers outside Mexico. But it should be noted that, because of UNAM's preeminent position within the university system as a whole, and the major budget allocations it receives from the government, the rectorship carries a great deal of political as well as academic weight.

Furthermore, keeping student unrest within bounds at the university is of much more than academic interest for politicians who remember the days of 1968 when UNAM-led student marches, and the subsequent bloody Tlatelolco massacre, shook Mexico's political system to its foundations.

This year, issues of university politics will be especially tricky because a leftist-controlled grouping of academic personnel and university workers, called SUNTU, is requesting Labor Ministry recognition as the official bargaining agent of all the country's state-supported

universities. SUNTU is headquartered at the UNAM. A strike threatened as early as this November.

There are two other noteworthy aspects of this year's fight. One is that the group which is in full gear to capture it—that of current rector Soberón himself—seeks above all to accumulate forces to influence the presidential succession of 1982, when López Portillo leaves office.

Soberón was first installed almost eight years ago (each term is for four years and an incumbent can be reelected once) under of Mario Moya Palencia, interior minister under Lúis Echeverría.

The second issue is the orientation of university education in the country. Up to now the line of thinking which has predominated at UNAM has been to favor so-called social science at the expense of natural science and mathematics. As revealed in a seminar sponsored by the Mexican Association of Fusion Energy this week, Mexico has only produced 1600 doctorates in theoretical and basic sciences in the past 35 years! Now, with ambitious economic development plans to absorb the oil revenues, the shortfalls in trained technical and scientific personnel loom as perhaps the most severe bottleneck the country faces.

The direction of university training has been a recurring battle. Benito Juárez, Abraham Lincoln's republican partner in Mexico, dis-

solved the national university several times because its teaching was controlled by Jesuit, feudal-minded currents opposed to the consolidation of nation-building.

Former President Lázaro Cárdenas, who served as rector from 1934-1940, was stymied in his efforts to harness the UNAM to the development needs of the nation in the 1930s. He created an entirely new institution of higher learning based on the tradition of the Ecole Polytechnique in France, the Instituto Politécnico Nacional.

With much of the responsibility for the success of long-term development efforts riding on the choice of the new UNAM rector, many Mexican analysts are showing concern about the candidates who have emerged so far. The former Mexican ambassador to the Soviet Union, Victor Flores Olea, is a well-known zero-growth advocate and close personal friend of Enrique González Pedrero, head of the National Commission of Free Textbooks in the Education Ministry and a fanatic Malthusian. González Pedrero and Flores Olea are both graduates of the UNAM, and both have been directors of the School of Political and Social Sciences there.

Although less prominently discussed at this moment, also in the running is Education Minister Fernando Solana, trained by the Jesuits.

The candidate of Soberón's faction is the current Secretary General of the UNAM, Fernando Pérez Correa.

It's a classic "política à la mexicana," but the outcome will provide an important reading of whether the underlying basis for sustained Mexican expansion is being properly set.