

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Sinaloa says no to Panorrhea

The PAN party got skunked again; though the PRI is still in trouble, so is the largest opposition party.

Local elections in the state of Sinaloa on Nov. 6 were a replay of the dramatic reversal of fortunes which the National Action Party (PAN) had suffered two months before in Baja California Norte. This surrogate party for the U.S. State Department and the IMF is now losing momentum in its whole strategy of smashing PRI control in the northern tier of states and de facto setting up a separatist entity.

Going into the final weeks of campaigning in this northwest state—the center of rich, irrigated agricultural production, of Mexico's largest fishing fleet, and of drug-trafficking—the PAN looked forward to a sweep of the larger cities and substantial inroads into secondary centers. The government's hefty new price increases in gasoline, milk, eggs, and rice seemed to augur even greater votes against the ruling PRI party, and in favor of the principal opposition, entrenched in middle-class strata, the PAN. However, the PAN ended up without winning in even one of the 18 major election districts, according to preliminary results.

As in Baja, it was demonstrated that, shaky as the PRI may be, the PAN has inherent weaknesses of its own.

Part of the PAN problem in Sinaloa was its local apparatus. The man who runs the PAN in the state, Manuel J. Clouthier, is an obese, bearded *latifundista*, suspected of flight capital operations and collusion with illegal drug interests. Clouthier put up his nephew, Jorge del Rincón, as the PAN mayoral candidate in the state capital of Culiacán—thereby rendering the

PAN attacks on the "nepotism" of PRI leaders less than effective. Ernesto Hay, a wealthy businessman with a house and most of his money tucked away in Tucson, Arizona, was the PAN candidate in the agricultural center of Los Mochis; in the industrial port of Mazatlán, the choice was Humberto Rice, another wealthy businessman most noted for passionate Protestant fundamentalism.

But what really did the PAN in was the repeat performance of the Mexican Labor Party. The PLM is universally recognized as the force which sank the PAN in Baja.

A spokesman for the communist PSUM party, which carried out a joint rally with the "staunch right-wing" PAN the day after the voting, wrote in a local newspaper column that it was "60 percent abstentionism" in the voting which had defeated the PAN, and that "it was the climate of tension introduced by the PLM" which had produced the abstentionism.

Exemplary of the PLM's unorthodox campaigning methods was the table set up in Culiacán's central square, where vaccinations were dispensed against "Panorrhea." Leaflets warning of the symptoms and listing the cures saturated the city. The PAN, wincing at every laugh from the population, complained in the press that some more poorly educated peasants were actually showing up at local hospitals worried that they might have symptoms of the dread disease.

Thousands of PLM posters quoting a public endorsement of Hitler's slave-labor system by PAN ideologue

José Angel Conchello, under a picture of Hitler reviewing Nazi shock troops, had the same powerful effect in Sinaloa as in Baja California. Ditto for PLM posters unmasking PAN collusion with the drug trade.

At the same time the PLM was able to press ahead with its own platform, even though it has yet to gain official electoral status. Its campaign for accelerated completion of a large-scale water project, the PLHINO, touched such a responsive chord in the population that the governor, Antonio Toledo Corro, was obliged to reaffirm his willingness to share water between his own state and Sonora, though he had originally stated he would cut the neighboring state out. "You do not play politics with water," Toledo declared Nov. 1; "the water belongs to the nation."

The PAN's desperation after its second major defeat in as many months may explain its turn to joint demonstrations with the far left. Observers in the next electoral battleground, Puebla, where voting will take place at the end of the month, say violence may be what the PAN has in mind next.

The party is also counting on aid from the faction of the PRI, grouped around secretary-general Vargas Saldána, which takes its orders from renegade Education Minister Jesús Reyes Heróles. But combinations of loyal local PRI networks and the PLM influence have boxed in Reyes so far.

There should be no illusions in the PRI, however. The economic crisis is infusing each local election around the country with the intensity normally associated with national elections, and the PRI cannot organize itself as a firemen's brigade forever. A reckoning has been postponed, but only that, if fundamental economic policy is not changed.