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CONFIDENTIAL DEPARTMENT OF STATE A-256

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SUBJECT : Youth and the Echeverria Administration

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Summary

After six months of the new administration it is clear that President Echeverria is making a concerted effort to improve relations between the political establishment and the nation's youth. He has appointed many young persons to important offices. The PRI has changed its statutes to give youth a greater role in official party affairs. Most of the prisoners from the 1968 Mexico City student disturbances have been freed; at the same time Echeverria, in his frequent dialogues with youth, urges a posture of conscientious rebellion. His own dynamism and frankness have aroused a measure of youthful enthusiasm.

Echeverria's stock with youth is higher now than when he entered office, and probably higher than that enjoyed at any time by President Diaz Ordaz. But further improvement will depend more on Echeverria's socio-economic policies and their implementation, than on gestures and elements of style. Politically active youth are more leftist than are the nation's political and economic leaders or the population in general. Echeverria cannot hope to satisfy their economic demands. At most he may be able to convince the less

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radical that he is moving the country in their direction, while perhaps persuading them that Mexico's best interests lie in a more moderate course.

Even so, student unrest will continue. There is no shortage of university and local issues to stimulate protest movements, and the campuses have long been a playground for external political and ideological interests. University reform, if carried out, may eliminate some causes of unrest, but will certainly add new ones.

Echeverria's Youth Orientation: Some Influencing Factors

Relations have long been cool between the Mexican Government and the official party on the one hand and the nation's politically aware and articulate youth on the other. Youth in this context refers primarily to students and university graduates up to about age 35. Most come from urban middle class backgrounds. They share with their peers elsewhere a generalized idealism, a penchant for systematic explanations of social phenomena and an affinity for frank criticism. They have no trouble detecting shortcomings in a social philosophy calling itself institutionalized revolution, or in a political system which, while claiming to be democratic, is marked by a high degree of centralization and authoritarian decision-making.

That Echeverria would be particularly concerned with the youth problem was ensured by the events of 1968 in Mexico City. The three-month-long demonstrations made it plain that youth disaffection could no longer be simply accepted and ignored. The 1968 movement was avowedly anti-Government, and it went further than any previous movement in attacking the authority and prestige of the presidency. Echeverria was, of course, Interior Secretary at the time. In the eyes of Mexico's youth he shares

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responsibility for the repressive action at Tlatelolco on October 2 in which at least 30 persons died.

Echeverria's youth orientation is also doubtless influenced by the age structure of Mexico's rapidly expanding population. More than half the population is under age 20, more than three-fourths under 40. It would require a conscious policy of gerontocracy to avoid giving youth a greater role.

Echeverria is himself the product of what in retrospect appears to have been the last major regenerative effort of the Mexican political system. He entered politics with Miguel Aleman who became President at age 43. The official party had just been renamed and partially restructured. The nation soon embarked on a new development strategy stressing rapid industrialization and a major role for the private sector. It was a period of excitement and political ferment and there was an influx of young men into positions of political importance. Those men are now in power and Echeverria may well judge it is time for a similar renewal.

If so, and despite the recent uncovering of the MAR plot, Echeverria is probably motivated less by concern that large numbers of youth will align themselves with subversive movements, than by a desire to harness the enthusiasm and potential of youth to the national development effort. He may have had this in mind when he told OAS Secretary General Galo Plaza last December that the appeal of the Mexican revolutionary past as an inspiration for the future had worn rather thin, particularly with the youth of the country, and that he would have to give new direction to his Government in order to retain support for the political system.

First Steps

This Embassy has remarked frequently on Echeverria's leadership style (see particularly Mexico's A-115 of March 22, 1971). While perhaps natural to him, it is also to some degree an element of conscious policy.

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Echeverria is certainly aware that the image of a hard-driving, straight-speaking, dynamic President is attractive to the nation's youth, themselves impatient for action. On his frequent trips around the country Echeverria makes a point of holding dialogues with student and youth groups. So far as we can tell these encounters are candid and the questions unscreened. Echeverria is at times critical and at times rejects youth proposals. But rapport is established and Echeverria often agrees with his questioners that there is much in Mexico that they should criticize and be unwilling to accept. It is an old technique for moderating opposition, but probably effective with all but the most hard-bitten.

A second important element in Echeverria's youth offensive is the appointment of a substantial number of young persons to important positions. Most such appointments were made during the first 100 days and are mentioned in some detail in A-115. More recently the accidental death of the Governor of Guerrero allowed Echeverria to name a 36-year-old replacement, Lic. Israel Noguera Otero. Paralleling the youthful trend in executive appointments, the PRI has recently revised its statutes to require the inclusion of persons under 26 on all lists of preliminary candidates for municipal office (see Mexico's A-197 of May 14, 1971). There is also some indication of a decision (in which Echeverria presumably concurred) to "unleash" the PRI Youth. At a national meeting in March PRI youth leaders demanded, among other reforms, a constitutional amendment lowering the minimum age for election to the Chamber of Deputies to 21 and to the Senate to 30. Present law requires 25 and 35 years respectively. More significantly, PRI National Youth Leader Jose de Jesus Medellin Muñoz has voiced support for the nationalization of the banking system, an idea subsequently rejected by Echeverria. It is doubtful he will return to it. But a PRI Youth willing to take positions apart from Government policy will find it easier to recruit new adherents.

For the past two and one half years the issue of political prisoners has loomed large in Government-youth relations. It was not new in 1968, having been one of the

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pretexts for the student movement of that year. But the emotional trauma of Tlatelolco, and the resulting many-fold multiplication of persons with claim to political prisoner status, raised it up to a new plane. Since taking office Echeverria has released most of the prisoners dating from 1968, even though many had been sentenced to long jail terms, and he has also freed a leader of the student strike at Morelia in 1966. The political prisoner issue is not dead, but it is no longer at center stage.

The Longer Term

In six months Echeverria has won a measure of youth support. His relations are better now than when he took office; they are certainly better than those enjoyed at any time by President Diaz Ordaz. While mildly optimistic, youth is skeptical: 1) About the degree to which Echeverria shares their vision of a future Mexico; and 2) Even if he does, how much he can do to bring it about.

Mexico's youth are more libertarian and more inclined toward socialism than are the nation's political and economic leaders or the population as a whole. They pay much more attention to the failures and shortcomings of post-Revolution Mexico than to its accomplishments. They are suspicious of private enterprise and even more of foreign investment. They tend to view Government as a conspiracy of the rich to protect their positions and privileges. The PRI is primarily an instrument of control, and the higher a man climbs in the party or Government the more likely he is to be considered an opportunist or worse.

On a number of counts Echeverria, all through his campaign and since taking office, has been making statements that coincide closely with youth views. The dominant theme of his administration so far is the need to bring about a more equal distribution of national wealth and social progress. He emphasizes that public office is a sacred trust; he denounces corruption. He has asserted that the Government should play a more vigorous leadership role in

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the economy. In pursuit of these objectives, programs have been started and initiatives taken (see Mexico's A-115).

On the other hand youthful critics are quick to note that Echeverria's economic policy to date is relatively moderate. Although he has publicly and strongly denounced selfish and unpatriotic businessmen, he has left little doubt that he supports a strong and growing private sector and that Mexico will continue to welcome foreign investment. The tax increases last December were relatively minor gestures toward a more equitable distribution of income. In rejecting the youth proposal that the banking system be nationalized, Echeverria displayed some skepticism about the efficiency of state-run entities. In the months and years ahead Echeverria will certainly implement some economic measures of particular appeal to youth: more substantial reform of the tax system is a likely prospect. But there is no indication as of now that he will abandon his basically moderate position.

Similarly there is no indication that Echeverria intends to abandon Mexico's pro-US neutrality in world affairs. He has in fact gone further than previous Mexican Presidents in publicly condemning communism and those Governments (unnamed) which attempt to export their political systems. He has made no significant efforts to improve relations with communist countries; rather the expulsion of five Soviet diplomats following the discovery of the MAR plot was a step in the opposite direction. Youth, except for the radical fringe, are not mindless worshipers of communist models. But many tend to view the United States as the greater threat to Mexico's independent development. In this context there is a certain amount of skepticism among the young about the role actually played by members of the MAR and about the role of the Soviets. Some go so far as to see the incident as a Government-concocted scheme to arouse nationalist feeling and to intimidate the domestic left.

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Even if Echeverria can increase present youth support for his policies and programs, perhaps in part by convincing the less radical of the necessity for moderate and evolutionary solutions to Mexico's problems, there will remain strong and lingering doubts about his ability to implement them. Already there is some inclination to allow that Echeverria may himself be well intentioned, but to couple it with the assertion that no man, not even the President, can do much to change the ongoing system. In this view he is not so much the instrument as the captive of political and economic interests. Since most of Mexico's more obvious problems will yield only gradually to administered solutions, many youth will doubtless find ample confirmation for this belief.

Campus Unrest

Unrest is chronic on Mexican campuses. Hardly a month passes without protest movements or intra-mural conflict at some university or its affiliated preparatory schools. A partial list for the past year includes the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Juarez University and the Technological Institute in Durango, and the Universities of Guadalajara, Sinaloa, Puebla and Nuevo Leon. To a considerable extent this recurring unrest can be separated from the question of youth attitudes toward the Echeverria administration. The issues are often local or internal to the institutions. Frequently little more is at stake than the rival power interests of contending student groups.

However, no recent Mexican administration has taken student unrest lightly, and for good reason. The campuses are largely outside the control of the PRI and Government. Students constitute one of the few free-floating elements in the Mexican political system and as such they are a target for manipulation by a variety of leftist groups as well as by persons within the power structure. It is no coincidence that most unrest occurs at public institutions, almost none at private. The differences in social

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and economic background of the student bodies provides only a small part of the explanation. More important is the fact that almost any problem at a public university has the potential for provoking confrontation with state or national authorities. To the radical left this offers the hope that student protest can be shifted to an ideological plane, to an attack on the political system or against socio-economic policies. For the PRI leader there is the hope of being able to embarrass or unhorse rival politicians. If he can gain control of a student body, for which a generous budget is usually necessary, it serves at once to demonstrate his own political skill and provides a continuing instrument of political pressure. We may suppose there is a price, political or otherwise, for keeping the students in line.

Most Mexicans are convinced the 1968 Mexico City disturbances were initially encouraged by one or various aspirants for the impending presidential nomination, perhaps by Presidency Secretary Martinez Manautou in an attempt to embarrass and discredit Interior Secretary Echeverria, perhaps by Carlos Madrazo in an attempt to force Diaz Ordaz to look beyond his closest advisers for a successor who would satisfy the students' demand for a more open political system. However this may be, the radical left eventually gained substantial control over the movement and it became avowedly anti-Government. On a smaller, less dramatic scale, the current crisis at the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon (see Embtel 2812 of May 24) may have some of the same characteristics.

If Echeverria is to succeed in strengthening his youth support, it is in his interest to prevent campus unrest from reaching the level of confrontation with government authorities. This means state as well as federal officials since few Mexicans, much less students, credit Governors with great independence of action when it comes to student matters. From Echeverria's point of view there are two dangers: 1) That excessive force will be used, thus exacerbating and polarizing both student

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and public opinion (and, we might add, evoking memories of Tlatelolco); and 2) That Government sponsored solutions, however well-intentioned, will be seen as infringements on university autonomy and thus serve as the basis for renewed and even stronger protest. In an attempt to circumvent these dangers Government policy during the first six months of the Echeverria administration has operated on a number of planes.

Echeverria's public posture is one of strict non-interference in university matters. He has pledged that his administration will respect university autonomy. He has generally avoided public discussion of problems at specific universities. In visits to or in the area of troubled institutions he has limited himself to urging contending factions to sit down and negotiate their differences. He has promised that university reform, if and when it comes, will derive from within the universities, not be imposed from without.

Less publicly it is clear that the Government is devoting considerable resources to the control of student groups. This is best documented at UNAM, but it may be true as well at provincial campuses. As usual there is both a carrot and a stick. Reportedly the administration has made it known that it will provide financial support for any student group rejecting Marxist ideas and the communist system and supporting Mexican Revolution and the administration's programs. One objective is to break the power of the Struggle Committees that have dominated UNAM student affairs since 1968. The second is to prevent the creation of any alternate unified student organization. The stick consists of student toughs (the Francisco Villa Group), paid and organized by the Federal District Government, whose role is to intimidate leftist student leaders and to break up anti-Government meetings. A number of students have been killed during the past year, many more injured. (See Embtel 1801 of April 1, 1971.)

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It may be that there is still a third level of Echeverria influence, of which even less is known publicly. We may presume that Echeverria, through intermediaries if not directly, is in touch with the heads of Mexico's universities and with state governors regarding university problems. The Communist Party magazine, Oposicion has stated that Nuevo Leon Governor Eduardo Elizondo has had Echeverria's support in his struggle with dissident groups at the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon, and that the recently implemented new Organic Law (a main bone of contention) is viewed by Mexico City as a possible model to be copied elsewhere. The communists have their own reasons for exaggerating the role of the Federal Government and Echeverria. But it is certain that Elizondo keeps one eye cocked toward Mexico City.

Finally, and despite Echeverria's statements, it is obvious that significant university reform in Mexico, to which this administration is pledged but about which it has yet to say anything very concrete, is bound to entail substantial Government interference in what students and faculty like to call internal university matters. In the longer run, better facilities, more qualified professors, education geared more closely to the availability of jobs once students graduate, may eliminate many of the more routine causes of student unrest. But it will require great political skill in the short run to prevent university reform from becoming a major disruptive issue in its own right. It is likely to be one of the more considered actions of this administration, and Echeverria may well delay such a move until he is more confident of his youth support. GP-3

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