

Sonoran leaders have had big impact

Citizens of the Mexican state of Sonora, which borders Arizona, will vote July 7 to choose a new governor. The race could be the strongest challenge to Mexico's ruling party in more than five decades.

By Keith Rosenblum
The Arizona Daily Star

HERMOSILLO — The governors of Sonora have been lawyers, civil servants, ranchers, military men and merchants.

They have become president of the nation four times. They have had ties, formal and informal, with Tucson families. One has fled across the border to Tucson to seek temporary asylum.

They generally have been well-to-do, educated — bilingual as well — and politically experienced before entering office.

In their six-year terms — four years prior to 1943 — they have made a disproportionately large impact on the development of modern Mexico.

No state but Sonora has seen four of its native sons become presidents, and three of those were from Guaymas. The "northern dynasty" of Gen. Alvaro Obregon, Plutarco



★ As Samuel Ocaña Garcia prepares to become an ex-governor, many observers rate him highly. Opposite page.

Elias Calles and Abelardo Rodriguez from 1920 to 1935 is credited with putting Mexico on track to a rapid prosperity.

Other governors of the state have gone on to influential federal ministries after serving a single term.

Sonoran governors, like the people they represent, have been seen as a breed apart by the rest of Mexico.

An oppressive climate, attacks by Indians, and isolation from the more developed parts of the republic forced Sonorans to become "stronger, more enterprising and

energetic" than their southern compatriots, says Juan Antonio Ruibal, Sonora state historian.

But unlike their predecessors of the 18th and 19th centuries, who could field militias to protect the *Provincia Interna de Occidente* of New Spain, governors in the past 50 years have fallen under the thumb of Mexico City and the all but omnipotent *presidente*.

Thus, the governors have had a minimum of autonomy in most respects. Their legacies are more personal than ideological.

"Governors will go so far as to ask permission from (Secretaria de) Gobernación (roughly an Interior Department) before they leave the country," says Tony Certosimo, executive director of the Arizona-Mexico Commission. "Only when they get the nod will they come" to the United States.

Governors must parrot the presidential line, even if it is not their own, says Lorenzo Meyer, a Colegio de Mexico professor.

"If they keep the state house in order for the president, then the spoils of the state government are his," he adds.

Adds Certosimo: "If the president is saying something anti-American, so will the governors. When I was in Mexico City (as a consul-general), they used to call us in advance and say, 'We're going to criticize you on this point, but don't worry, it's for home consumption.' It's a part of their political system."

In spite of a governor's minimum of latitude in making policy, Sonoran governors have established themselves generally as pro-business, anti-*ejido* (a communal farm), disciplinarian, non-protectionist in trade, and pragmatic.

With few exceptions, the governors of recent decades also have had excellent ties with Arizonans.

Save for Faustino Félix Serna, who governed Sonora from 1967 to 1973, each governor from the time of Ignacio Soto in 1949 has been a steady visitor to Arizona and a personal friend of his counterpart in Arizona.

Howard Pyle, Republican governor of Arizona from 1951 to 1955, says he had a "very, very warm relationship" with Soto, who "resembled one

of the old Spanish dons and was a perfect image of a grandfather."

Paul Fannin, Republican governor of Arizona from 1959 to 1965, helped found the Arizona-Sonora Commission (now the Arizona-Mexico Commission) with his counterpart Alvaro Obregon, whom he remembers as "industrious, full of energy, and very articulate."

The good will carried into Fannin's relationship with Luis Encinas Johnson, governor of Sonora from 1961 to 1967. So close were the ties, in fact, that the Arizona and Sonora delegations of the commission traveled together to world's fairs in Seattle and New York in groups of more than 100.

Former Governor Raul Castro, a Democrat who served from 1975 to 1978, recalls excellent ties with both Carlos Armando Biebrich and his midterm successor, Alejandro Carrillo Marcor.

Carrillo's rhetoric was pointedly leftist. According to Castro, who now practices law in Phoenix, the U.S. Department of State called him a communist and had forbidden him entry to the United States. But Castro, certain of his counterpart's underlying affinity for the United States, invited him to Arizona in spite of the State Department edict.

"It was a wonderful stay," recalls Castro. "I made sure there were no uniformed agents at the airport, and when he got off the plane and looked around for all the police types — there weren't any. . . . Things like this make a big difference. You know, I never heard him say anything anti-American."

Many of the Sonoran ex-governors have maintained condominiums or homes in Tucson. Like many of the Sonoran elite, they send their spouses and children to Tucson doctors and hospitals.

Soto lived in Douglas, where he dealt in insurance and electric power. Carrillo lived in San Antonio, Texas, where he attended school while his father worked in the foreign service.

From Soto on, all the governors have spoken English, though few speak it publicly. At the age of 19, in 1927, Carrillo won first place in a Texas high school state oratory contest.

Next: Campaign financing.



Sonoran governors — Four former governors of Sonora gathered last October to hear Samuel Ocaña Garcia give his state of the state message. From left to right are Faustino Felix

Serna, who served from 1967 to 1973; Alvaro Obregon Tapia, 1955 to 1961; Luis Encinas Johnson, 1961 to 1967; and Carlos S. LaFontaine, who served for 13 days in 1967.