

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

The IMF's candidate for the presidency?

Ibarra played an 'IMF card' to help his cabinet position, but may have shot down his 1981 bid.

Finance Minister David Ibarra Muñoz has been feverishly traveling the length and breadth of the land in recent days, visiting numerous regional offices of his ministry and showing up at not a few political events. For experienced political observers here, Ibarra's tracks lead in an unmistakable direction: to build up momentum for a presidential bid to succeed José López Portillo, who leaves office in late 1982.

Ibarra is not the likeliest candidate for the job, since he has risen on the "technocratic" side of the government hierarchy rather than the "political side." But it is not forgotten here that López Portillo himself filled the finance post before he was tapped five years ago, and that López Portillo also came from a background of administrative posts.

Mr. Ibarra, however, now has a bigger problem to contend with. Analysts here believe that last month's International Monetary Fund meeting in Washington, where Ibarra played a high-profile role, may prove his undoing in the intricate maneuverings which characterize the Mexican succession fight within the governing PRI party.

Ibarra went into the meetings on shaky ground within the Mexican cabinet. As we have reported before, he has been the leading "slower growth" voice in economic cabinet debate. He crossed swords

repeatedly with "fast growth" advocates led by Industry Minister José Andrés de Oteyza.

In a previous column, we recounted one particularly acrimonious cabinet session in mid-August where de Oteyza, with López Portillo's approval, proposed an ambitious steel expansion program and Ibarra refused to give finance ministry sanction. Ibarra lost points on that occasion; *EIR* even picked up insistent reports that he might be on his way out of the cabinet.

Ibarra responded by pulling off something of a publicity coup at the annual IMF/World Bank meeting in Washington, in order to solidify his position. As the outgoing head of the developing nations' caucus at the IMF, the Group of 24, he had politicked heavily within the world organization, and managed to emerge at the end of September meetings as head of the Development Committee. This is the supreme formal policy-recommending council of the IMF/World Bank. Ibarra is clearly counting on using his new international post to save his neck domestically.

Ibarra spared no pains to have word of his IMF exploits highly publicized back home. Sources tell us that he arranged for a virtual planeload of Mexican journalists to accompany him to Washington, and enjoy a number of fringe benefits not appearing on their newspapers' expense accounts. "Even the

smallest little broadsheet found itself brought up to Washington," commented one source.

But while Ibarra and his allies were congratulating themselves in Washington, the word was let out in an important government office in Mexico that "this was an outrageous political move for the presidency." The word spread through the political gossip circles like wildfire.

Ibarra's troubles were multiplied when one of his aides, upon returning to Mexico, revealed that Ibarra had "flirted" with certain U.S. financial officials in private meetings. He also reportedly got together a closed-door Washington meeting with Mexican private bankers. When word of this reached the higher levels in Mexico, the reaction was uniform: "Ibarra has put himself forward as the IMF's candidate for presidency."

In another country, such as Maggie Thatcher's Britain, the IMF's blessing may be an asset in gaining high office. But in Mexico it is a curse—the IMF is strongly disliked in most official circles because of its attempts to prevent countries like Mexico from industrializing.

Ibarra, however, is not alone in his apparent taste for the IMF. One prominent Mexican reminded *EIR* that the key person in this regard is Gustavo Romero Kolbeck, the director of the Bank of Mexico. Mr. Kolbeck is monetarism personified in Mexico, and is well known for his earlier work in founding the private sector think tank, the CEESP.

"Kolbeck is not only the most important monetarist 'Trojan Horse' inside the government," this source commented. "He is Mr. Ibarra's 'grey matter' as well."