

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

The wrong salute

A flap over the flag has one of Mexico's most prominent columnists on the political ropes.

José Antonio Pérez Stuart, the widely read columnist of Mexico's prestigious daily *Excelsior*, set off a political scandal in mid-September which has cost him his business backing and may end up costing him his job.

It was already a scandal of sorts that Pérez Stuart had the kind of forum which his "Portafolios" column gave him among the Mexican and foreign business community of Mexico City. A former member of Mexico's best-known neo-Nazi group, the MURO, Pérez Stuart regularly made anti-Semitic references in his column, combined with repeated insinuations that the best way to deal with Mexico's problems was a Chile-style coup.

The new flap seemed to involve nothing more significant than a flag-presentation ceremony. On Sept. 11, Gen. Arturo López Flores, the number-three official in the Defense Ministry, ceremonially presented the national flag to the leadership of the Mexican Employers' Confederation (Coparmex).

To appreciate the significance of this event, it is necessary to give a word on the line-up of Mexico's private sector associations. Three major associations were established in the late 1930s as officially-registered private-sector lobbying groups with a defined interface with the government: the Confederation of Chambers of Industry (Concamin); the Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce (Concanaco); and, in the late 1940s, the more nationalist National Confed-

eration of Processing Industries (Canacindra).

Two private-sector groups sprang up later outside any government framework, and frequently in almost insurrectionary opposition to it, the Businessmen's Coordinating Council (CCE) and Coparmex.

Few in the government have forgotten that Coparmex was a principal backer of the "Mexico in Liberty" series of meetings late last year which threatened the then-incoming de la Madrid government with a "civic insurgency." Many Coparmex regional officials have since then either supported the fascist PAN party or run as PAN candidates themselves.

The government does not normally present flags to private institutions "in the trust of the nation," as the ceremony goes, so the Coparmex event was definitely a message. Observers interpreted the event as a government challenge to the Coparmex leadership to show more loyalty to the nation than it had in the past, especially given Mexico's collapsed economic condition and rising regional tensions.

José María Basagoiti, the head of Coparmex declared as he received the flag that "being a businessman implies being a patriot, having the disposition of putting national interests above private ones."

Pérez Stuart put an entirely different interpretation on the event. In his Portafolios column of Sept. 14, he stated that the army was giving Coparmex recognition as "the only employers' grouping with real represen-

tation and weight in terms of relations between the state and the private sector." He insinuated that there was in fact an alliance between the army and businessmen in Coparmex against the rest of the government—a dramatic assertion to make, since he himself has long insisted that a military coup would require exactly this combination.

The Pérez Stuart view, which he repeated in a column later the same week, caused stupefaction in business circles. Sources close to Basagoiti say that the Coparmex chief called on Pérez Stuart to publish an immediate retraction of the offending statements. According to these sources, Basagoiti called the business columnist "crazy," and accused him of attempting to set up the private sector by fueling a confrontation between the army and the president.

Many other business leaders were angry, too. *Excelsior* decided to drop Pérez Stuart from its pages. However the offending columnist received a last-minute reprieve. According to reliable sources, it came through the intervention of the former mayor of Mexico City, Carlos Hank González, one of Mexico's most wealthy and corrupt powerbrokers, who heads a business consortium called Hermes.

Pérez Stuart began to repay favors on Oct. 4. In a column pleasing to Hank's sponsors in international drug and hot-money trades, he called for Mexico's border city of Tijuana to become the Hong Kong of the 1990's "when the British lease" on the island runs out in 1990.

Pérez Stuart has also emerged as one of the IMF's most passionate defenders. Mixing his love of the IMF with his anti-Semitism, he declared a year ago that the Mexican Labor Party, a leading advocate against the IMF, was part of "Zionist networks" seeking the economic ruin of the country.