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Government's Arrest of ex-Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon Seen as Political Maneuver ahead of Upcoming Elections

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President Felipe Calderón's administration described the arrest of former Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon, a member of one of Mexico's most powerful political families, as another step against political corruption. In contrast, critics viewed the move as a political miscalculation that could come back to haunt the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in coming elections. The controversy regarding the arrest is expected to strengthen the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as it seeks to retain the governorship of México state in the July 3 election and, more important, retake the presidency in 2012.

In a high-profile move on June 4, the Mexican Army arrested Hank Rhon and 10 other people and charged them with involvement in organized crime and with weapons violations. At the time of the arrest, authorities seized 88 high-caliber weapons from the former Tijuana mayor's estate.

Hank, son of the late powerful PRI politician Carlos Hank González and brother of influential businessman Carlos Hank Rhon, disputed the government's accusations, and his lawyers managed to convince a federal court to drop the organized-crime charges. Federal Judge Blanca Evelia Parra Meza cited a lack of evidence in ordering Hank Rhon's release less than two weeks after his arrest.

Organized-crime, weapons charges fail to stick

Authorities insist that the weapons charges against Hank are legitimate, since two of the arms seized from Hank Rhon's estate are said to be linked to a couple of murders in which the former Tijuana mayor allegedly participated in some form.

Hank Rhon, who has a reputation as an eccentric individual, inherited a large sum of money from his father and built upon that fortune with profits from the Agua Caliente Casino and Racetrack. The complex includes a zoo that holds 20,000 animals, a German-language school, a private bullfighting ring, and a stadium for Tijuana's soccer team. The team, known as the Xoloitzcuintles (a name for a breed of dogs popular with the Aztecs), recently ascended to the top division in Mexico's soccer league. There was a question of whether the team would be allowed to move up a level given that owners must be "of good moral character." The Federación Mexicana de Fútbol avoided the controversy, however, by affirming that the team is actually owned by Hank Rhon's son, Jorge Alberto Hank Inzunza.

Hank Rhon also has the reputation of a populist. He won the Tijuana mayor's race in 2004 by using his considerable personal wealth to organize a rally that was more like a huge party in which he treated participants to free alcoholic beverages, a lineup of nationally famous entertainers, and the opportunity to win 10 new minivans in a raffle ([SourceMex, Aug. 4, 2004](#)).

Hank Rhon has maintained this populist reputation by constantly giving away school supplies, scholarships, and toys. And he has managed to win a portion of the Tijuana population to his side

during his recent legal problems. Many Tijuana residents were photographed with pro-Hank Rhon T-shirts with the inscription Todos Somos Hank (We are all Hank).

In politics, Hank appears to have followed in the footsteps of his father, known as one of the most corrupt politicians in Mexican history. Carlos Hank González, who served as governor of México state and held several Cabinet posts, is notorious for his quote, "A politician who is poor is a poor politician."

Leaked diplomatic dispatches posted on the Wikileaks Web site painted a very unflattering picture of the former Tijuana mayor. "Hank is widely believed to have been a corrupt mayor and to be still involved in narco-trafficking....He still enjoys wide influence in Tijuana, and state law enforcement officials appear unwilling to meddle on areas considered his turf," said the cable.

Authorities implicate ex-mayor in two murders

Hank Rhon has been unable to shake his rumored ties to organized crime, including the Arellano Félix drug-trafficking family, also known as the Tijuana cartel. There are also reports that Hank might have had a role in a couple of assassinations. One involved the murder of journalist Héctor Félix Miranda, co-editor of the weekly newspaper Semanario Zeta, in 1988 ([SourceMex, June 30, 2004](#)). Baja California authorities also allege that Hank Rhon participated in the killing of Angélica María Muñoz Cervantes in 2009. Muñoz was the girlfriend of his son Sergio.

The businessman/politician has also gotten away with violating other Mexicans laws, including customs regulations dealing with the import of ivory.

The problem for authorities is that they have never been able to make any charges against Hank Rhon stick. Even with the latest case, analysts say the former mayor might have used his influence with police and other local authorities in Baja California state to weaken the government's case against him. Political observers say only a powerful individual like Hank can so easily and so quickly avoid the serious charges brought by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR).

"Surely the readers share my opinion that any average citizen caught in flagrant possession of a cache of weapons reserved only for the use of Mexico's armed forces, that person would immediately lose his freedom," said Juan Carlos Mondragón Quintana, a columnist for E-Consulta, an online news site that covers central Mexico. "Jorge Hank Rhon was allowed to go free even though he was in possession of a large supply of weapons, two of which are traced to murder cases."

Hank Rhon's release appears to be a setback for the Calderón government and particularly for Attorney General Marisela Morales, who assumed the job with high expectations ([SourceMex, April 6, 2011](#)). Morales has insisted that the arrest was not a witch hunt and that she did not know until after the fact that Hank Rhon would be among those detained.

"This has been a disaster for the federal government," political analyst Raymundo Riva Palacio said on a Mexico City radio program. "What will happen is that nothing will happen. Here, everyone remains untouchable."

Mondragón Quintana noted, however, that a deficient judicial system allowed Hank Rhon to elude charges. "I don't see this as a setback for the attorney general but as a judicial system that fails to uphold the rule of law," said the columnist. "Independent of the electoral considerations, one must not forget that the weapons were [in Hank Rhon's estate] and that a crime does exist."

PRI alleges electoral motives

Still, timing appears to be the biggest problem for the Calderón government. Critics argue that the government could have moved against Hank at any time and only chose to do so now because of his ties to Mexico state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto.

"Hank's shady business interests and alleged connection to a murder made him a possible target for investigation for many different crimes including money laundering and murder, so the surprise arrest for the relatively petty crime of illegal possession of weapons has Tijuana wondering if there are political motivations for Hank's untimely detention," said Insightcrime.org, an organization that monitors organized crime in the Americas.

Some analysts said the arrest might have been an effort by the PAN administration to damage the reputation of the PRI ahead of the México state election and the 2012 presidential race. The link between the two elections is outgoing Mexico state Gov. Peña Nieto, the favorite to win the PRI nomination in 2012.

Even after Judge Parra Meza ordered Hank Rhon's release, he was taken into custody again through a legal maneuver known as the , the equivalent of a detention pending further investigation. "This is the clearest indication that, instead of conducting a serious investigation, [the Calderón government] is flailing about trying to find justification for keeping this guy in jail," said John Mill Ackerman, a law professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

But others point out that, even though the federal judge ordered Hank's release, the arrest served to remind voters of the type of party the PRI had been during the seven decades in which it governed Mexico. "Let's not confuse ourselves, Jorge Hank Rhon...represents the PRI and is the emblem of the abuses, corruption, and decadence of PRIism," columnist Martin Moreno wrote in the daily newspaper . "Was it a political blow? Of course."

PRI politicians have not been shy about accusing the Calderón administration of using the case for political gain. Party president Humberto Moreira went a step further, suggesting that the case was evidence that Calderón has lost his direction in various areas of governance. He demanded that the government present proof. Other PRI members likened the arrest of Hank Rhon to the Michoacanazo in 2009, in which the government detained several mayors and other public officials in Michoacán state on charges of colluding with drug traffickers ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009](#)) and ([Aug. 19, 2009](#)). All the mayors, primarily from the PRI and the PRD, were released from custody after a federal judge ruled that the government lacked sufficient evidence to charge them ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)).

But some analysts suggested that the PRI leaders probably will not press too hard in the Hank Rhon case, partly because of the party's efforts to portray itself as an institution that has undergone transformation and modernization. "They assume [Hank] is indefensible," said political columnist Alfonso Zárate Flores, who writes for the Mexico City daily .

Hank Rhon has hinted that he might run for governor of Baja California in 2013. "Whatever my party wants me to do, I am at their service," said Hank Rhon. The ex-mayor of Tijuana represented the PRI in the 2007 gubernatorial election but lost by several percentage points to José Guadalupe Osuna Millán of the PAN ([SourceMex, Aug. 8, 2007](#)).

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