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Mexican Opposition Parties Reaching Out to Expatriates in U.S.

by LADB Staff
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The two major opposition parties, the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), are directing some of their campaign efforts to expatriates living in the US. In early May, two months before the July 2 presidential election, candidates Vicente Fox of the PAN and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD each took their campaigns to Mexican communities in the US. The two candidates are making a special effort to convince expatriates to travel to Mexican communities near the US border to vote.

Expatriates can participate in the election at special booths established by the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) in every electoral district that borders the US. The unprecedented step allows Mexican expatriates to participate in the elections, after the Senate, led by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), last year defeated a measure to permit Mexicans residing overseas to cast absentee ballots (see SourceMex, 1999-07-14).

Polls show most expatriates would vote against PRI

Some political observers say the expatriates appear energized by the competitive presidential race, especially since recent national polls have shown Fox in a statistical dead heat with the PRI candidate Francisco Labastida (see SourceMex, 2000-05-03). "Migrants have become an issue in [Mexican] presidential politics in a way they never have before," said Robert Smith, a sociologist with the Project on Migration and Diasporas at Barnard College in New York.

"They're a very important swing vote." Informal polls have shown most Mexicans residing in the US would rather support a member of an opposition party than the PRI. A recent survey by PRD sympathizers among expatriates in California showed only 14% support were for Labastida, while 49% expressed a preference for Cardenas and 33% for Fox.

But some expatriates who would normally support Cardenas and the PRD have endorsed Fox. "The priority right now in Mexico is to throw out the PRI," said Baltazar Avila, who in the past has led organizing efforts on behalf of the PRD in California. "We support Fox because he is going to win."

In addition to their potential votes, opposition politicians are considering the financial clout of Mexicans residing in the US. Expatriates sent back almost US$6 billion to Mexico last year, the country's third-largest source of foreign exchange (see SourceMex, 2000-04-12). As part of their campaign strategies, the Fox and Cardenas camps are urging Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to lobby their relatives and friends through postcards, phone calls, and messages included with the money orders sent to their hometowns.

The Fox and Cardenas campaigns have focused most of their get-out-the-vote efforts in California, Illinois, Michigan, Oregon, Washington, and Texas, the states with the largest concentrations of
Mexican citizens. The PAN and the PRD are planning caravans of buses and cars to carry Mexican citizens across the border July 2 to vote. IFE estimates show some 1.5 million registered Mexican voters reside at least part of the year in the US.

In campaign speeches to expatriates, both Fox and Cardenas pledged to seek changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to ensure greater protections for undocumented workers, including mechanisms to allow Mexicans to transit freely across the border. "We will use all our persuasion and all our talent to bring together the US, Canadian, and Mexican governments so that in five to 10 years, the border is totally open to the free movement of workers," Fox told participants at a recent California rally.

Both Cardenas and Fox also attempted to appear presidential during their trips to the US, scheduling meetings with politicians, bankers, and newspaper editors to discuss the Mexican economy and US-Mexico relations. During his recent trip to California, Fox was invited to address the state legislature.

The two parties have also taken the opportunity to criticize some government policies that affect expatriates. Prominent among these is the refusal by President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to legalize about 2 million motor vehicles introduced into Mexico by Mexicans who reside in the US part of the year (see SourceMex, 1999-11-10, 1999-12-08, 2000-05-03). The Cardenas camp has also criticized the government for failing to defend the rights of undocumented workers.

In particular, Cardenas referred to an anonymous brochure circulating in southern Arizona, inviting volunteers to area ranches to help keep "trespassers" from destroying private property. In a letter to US Attorney General Janet Reno, human rights advocates said the brochure "is an outright invitation to form hunting posses against workers and families coming across our border in search for jobs."

**Zedillo criticized for lackluster support of emigrants**

Cardenas said the Zedillo government is partially to blame because of its failure to stand up to President Bill Clinton's administration for its punitive immigration policies. "This matter [in Arizona] deserves greater attention from the Mexican government," said Cardenas. "Mexican authorities need to demand that these types of aggressions against Mexican migrants be stopped."

The daily newspaper El Universal said that at least 24 incidents were reported during a 20-day period in April when "vigilantes" detained undocumented immigrants and forced them to return to Mexico. The incidents appear to be concentrated in Cochise County, near Douglas, Arizona. Notwithstanding Cardenas' criticism, the Mexican government has taken some steps to halt the illegal actions against undocumented immigrants in southern Arizona.

In early May, the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) hired a legal team in the US to determine how to bring the matter to the US courts. "For the first time, we have contracted a group of US lawyers to help us round up evidence, so that we, as the government of Mexico, can bring suit, with proof, against those who have violated the rights and dignity of Mexicans," said Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green. US and Mexican officials have held discussions on the issue.
In a visit to Mexico City in early May, US Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder said the Clinton administration is committed to seeking a prompt solution to threatened attacks on migrants, and he called border violence "a constant concern for the United States."

The actions of the Arizona ranchers prompted the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to send additional agents to an area in southern Arizona stretching from Nogales to Douglas. The additional agents have been instructed to prevent ranchers from detaining undocumented immigrants. "We are also seeking new measures to speed up deportations and to prevent crimes against undocumented immigrants," regional INS director Johnny Williams said at a binational conference on border affairs in Sonora. (Sources: The News, 05/03/00; Associated Press, 04/26/00, 05/02/00, 05/04/00, 05/07/00; El Universal, 04/27/00, 04/28/00, 05/04/00, 05/05/00, 05/09/00; Novedades, 05/04/00, 05/09/00; Los Angeles Times, 05/04/00, 05/08/00, 05/09/00; San Diego Union-Tribune, Copley News Service, La Jornada, 05/08/00, 05/09/00; The Washington Post, Reforma, El Economista, The Dallas Morning News, 05/09/00)

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