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Immigration Plan Could Affect Political Fortunes of U.S., Mexican Presidents

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The political fortunes of Mexican President Vicente Fox and US President George W. Bush could be riding on an immigration proposal presented by the US president at the beginning of January. The ambitious plan would allow several million undocumented immigrants in the US to apply for temporary legal status for at least six years, provided they are employed. The plan applies to citizens of all countries, but is specifically targeted at Mexican nationals, who comprise the largest percentage of undocumented immigrants in the US.

Mexico's population agency (Consejo Nacional de Poblacion CONAPO) estimates that the number of Mexican-born residents of the US reached 9.9 million in 2003, with 2.3 million of this total undocumented immigrants. The plan, however, does not offer immigrants any direct means of obtaining permanent resident status, forcing them to return to their country of origin once their six-year work permit expires.

One benefit of the guest-worker program could be to create a framework to expand the amount of money sent by expatriates to relatives in Mexico. These remittances have been growing steadily in recent years, with the total of US$12.38 billion reported in January-November 2003 already surpassing projections for the year (see SourceMex, 2003-10-18), said CONAPO.

The proposal initially received a mixed reaction from the Mexican government, with Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez offering a lukewarm endorsement. Derbez said he welcomed the initiative, but acknowledged that the US government's proposal was limited. "We will continue working until we obtain what we have sought for many years, a complete and integrated immigration program."

**Mexican President Vicente Fox needs political victory**

Fox echoed Derbez's statements that an immigration agreement needs to be more comprehensive, but he also said he was the one who originally proposed many of the elements incorporated in Bush's plan. "This is the program that President Bush and I had discussed several years ago when he was governor of Texas and I was governor of Guanajuato," Fox told reporters. "We revisited the plan shortly after our respective elections in 2000 and have been discussing it for the past three years."

Some analysts said Fox may be taking too much credit for the agreement. "The Mexican government isn't responsible for any of it," said political scientist Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM). "It all has to do with the electoral motives of the Bush team."
The Mexican president later endorsed the agreement fully during a press conference at the Summit of the Americas in Monterrey on Jan. 12. "This is a very important step forward for many Mexican workers in the United States," said Fox, noting that the agreement creates a framework to protect the labor and human rights of Mexican workers in the US.

Political observers say Fox is hoping to showcase an immigration agreement as one concrete accomplishment of his administration because he has thus far failed to meet other campaign promises, especially regarding energy, tax, and labor reforms (see SourceMex, 2003-03-05 and 2004-01-07). The Bush administration's decision to even put forth an immigration proposal represents an advance of sorts for Fox.

The US government had pushed the issue to the back burner in the aftermath of the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington and the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001 (see SourceMex, 2001-09-26). "This [proposal] has to be viewed as a win-win situation for Fox," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington. "If anything, Fox is back in the spotlight. He badly needs a victory to help revive his own domestic agenda."

The immigration agreement may not be sufficient to change Fox's political fortunes. "He's in limbo; we are looking at the long end of a presidential term," said political analyst Lorenzo Meyer of the Colegio de Mexico. "Fox is a good human being. I like him as a person. But we are not in a contest to see who is the nicest person. We are looking for a strong leader in very complex times." And analysts caution that Bush's proposal should not be seen as a long-term solution to the country's economic problems.

Rather, analysts say, the Fox government should work more vigorously to reduce unemployment at home. "We are in the fourth year of employment decline," said economist Rogelio Ramirez of the Mexico City-based consulting company Ecanal. Ramirez and other economists say Mexico needs 800,000 new jobs a year to keep up with the growth in the economically active population (EAP).

Rather than create new positions, however, Mexico has lost 1.2 million jobs during the past three years. The employment picture does not look promising, at least for the early part of 2004. In a survey conducted by Manpower Mexico, 62% of companies surveyed said they do not plan to increase their work force and another 13% will eliminate some positions during the first quarter of 2004. The remaining 25% said they expected to increase their work force by a minimal number.

**Critics say US President Bush motivated by re-election**

Critics in the US and Mexico say the Bush administration also took political considerations into account when creating the plan. The US president is accused of using the proposal to bolster his standing among US Latino voters ahead of the US presidential election in November 2004. "There is no doubt the immigration proposal offered by George Bush has an electoral purpose," said columnist Eduardo Andrade Sanchez of the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico, who questioned whether the US president will work hard enough to obtain approval of the initiative in Congress. "This proposal has little chance of approval in the US Congress and does not address the long-term needs of undocumented immigrants," said Andrade.
Some political observers said Bush's proposal will probably not capture too many additional Latino votes in the 2004 election, but the agreement may still be useful to the president in the case of a tight election, as was the case in 2000. "What Bush doesn't want is to lose any Hispanic votes," said ITAM analyst Rafael Fernandez de Castro.

Some leaders in the US Latino community said they will reserve judgment until they see what direction the administration takes with the initiative. "The Latino community knows the difference between political posturing and a real policy debate," said Cecilia Munoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza.

The plan has already met stiff resistance from some members of Bush's Republican Party, particularly ultraconservatives like US Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO). Tancredo, who chairs the House Immigration Reform Caucus, has gone on record as opposing any proposal that even hints at offering amnesty to undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 2002-07-24). "You might call it amnesty on the installment plan, you might call it amnesty after some sort of indentured servitude, but it's amnesty and that is the worst type of public policy," Tancredo said in response to Bush's proposal.

The proposal has gained conditional support from many Democrats, but party leaders would like the plan to go further. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) said participants in the program should not only be allowed to work in the US but also be guaranteed a minimum wage of at least US $5.15 per hour. Still, public opinion could play a role in whether Bush's plan obtains congressional support.

One survey conducted by CNN, USA Today, and Gallup showed 55% of respondents opposed the Bush plan, with 42% supporting it. The survey was conducted among 1,033 adults shortly after Bush announced the proposal. Bush has attempted to deflect criticism that his immigration plan is electorally motivated. "Yes, there's politics involved. And there will be politics probably involved in whether or not it passes Congress," Bush told reporters at the Summit of the Americas. "But the reason I proposed the initiative is because it is the right thing for America to do."

The president also used the press conference to try to appease opponents in his own party. "This plan is not amnesty," Bush said. "I oppose amnesty because it encourages the violation of our laws and perpetuates illegal immigration." Fernandez de Castro said Bush would also be able to sell the agreement to critics from the right by pointing out that the accord could allow the US government to exercise stricter control at the US-Mexico border. "What worries me is that we may end up with a tighter border and nothing else, because Bush needs Congress for the other changes and that will be tough in an election year," said the ITAM analyst.

The Bush administration acknowledged that the proposed immigration plan would give the federal government another tool to monitor the flow of migrants to the US. In an interview, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said the US government is aware of a couple of networks used by immigrant smugglers that could easily be used to bring "terrorists" into the US. If this
"infrastructure" can be used to bring an undocumented immigrant to the US, it certainly can be used to allow entry to a terrorist, Ridge said.

But some analysts questioned the administration's plan to use Bush's immigration proposal to monitor the flow of immigrants. "The scale of this [operation] is such that it could swamp any real chance of building an effective immigration system," said University of Virginia law professor David Martin, who served as general counsel with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for three years during former US President Bill Clinton's administration. The INS has since been renamed the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

US airport security measures also anger Mexicans
The Bush immigration plan was announced at the height of the federal government's strict security alert during the Christmas and New Year's holiday season. During this period, The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) raised the country's alert level to "orange," based on intelligence suggesting that terrorists would try to hijack an international flight bound for the US. Security was tightened not only at airports but at US-Mexico and US-Canada border crossings and seaports.

During this period, the Bush administration took some steps that angered Mexicans. The measures included stationing more than 50 officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at Mexican airports to work with Mexican security personnel.

Mexican opposition legislators immediately denounced the presence of US security personnel on Mexican soil, criticizing the Fox administration for surrendering the country's sovereignty to foreigners. "It appears to me [the Fox administration] is violating the Constitution," said Sen. Orlando Paredes Lara, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The presence of foreign agents in Mexico also did not sit well with the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which initiated a resolution for the standing committee of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate (Comision Permanente) to summon Foreign Relations Secretary Derbez, Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda, and other key members of Fox's Cabinet. "The administration has allowed the violation of our sovereignty," said PRD Deputies Eliana Garcia and Horacio Martinez.

In addition to the complaint about violating sovereignty, critics also pointed to the ill treatment afforded Mexican passengers scheduled to board flights destined for the US during the holiday period. The screening process at Mexican airports was much stricter than at US airports, with many Mexican nationals forced to submit to fingerprinting and mug shots a process similar to booking procedures in an arrest. "It's humiliating to be fingerprinted as if you were a criminal," said Leonardo Curzio, a commentator on the television news analysis show Primer Plano. "No Mexicans have been linked to terrorism nor has there been the slightest suspicion."

Some Mexican legislators and academics urged the Fox administration to adopt retaliatory measures such as those implemented by the Brazilian government, which ordered its immigration authorities to begin fingerprinting all US visitors. "In Mexico, we must follow the example of Brazil, which
offers an example of how we should react against the unilateral policies of the US," said Roberto Pena, director of the Centro de Relaciones Internacionales at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

Derbez acknowledged that there was some frustration in Mexico about the US security measures, but said the Fox administration had no plans to fingerprint US visitors. Legislators from Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) defended the Fox administration's actions, saying the operation was "uncomfortable" for many Mexicans but did not violate any of the country's laws.

"In respect to airport security, it could be a little harsh, but it's better than facing a disaster or an emergency," said PAN Deputy Fernando Guzman Perez Pelaez. The Fox administration also sought to justify its actions. "The threats of violent acts and terrorism were real, and that is why we implemented the security measures in the country's major airports," said Armando Salinas Torre, deputy interior secretary for population, migration, and religious affairs.

Salinas acknowledged, however, that Mexican agents did not find sufficient evidence to detain any individuals nor did it find any explosives or weapons in any aircraft. The US security measures also had a negative impact on the Mexican aviation sector, with Aeromexico being forced to cancel two flights from Mexico City to Los Angeles on Christmas. "We had specific information about a potential threat to those flights and we shared that information with the Mexican government, and the Mexican government made the decision to cancel the flights," said DHS spokeswoman Rachel Sunbarger.

Aeromexico spokesman Carlos Bonilla complained that the cancellation of flights and the additional security measures had cost the airline thousands of dollars and called on the US or Mexican government to cover these costs. Beyond the immediate financial impact on the airline, he raised concerns about long-term implications. "We are most worried about the damage to the image of Aeromexico because our clients are accustomed to efficient and punctual service," said Bonilla.

As an additional measure, the Mexican government agreed to a request from the Bush administration to place armed guards on all flights destined for the US. The tourism sector also raised concerns about the short- and long-term financial impact of the security measures on the industry, with many US visitors canceling hotel reservations in Mexico during this busy vacation period. "This is going to have an impact, at least in the short term, on tourism activity," said Miguel Torruco Marques, director of the Asociaci

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