

9-6-2006

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## Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Center-left Legislators Prevent President Fox From Delivering State Address." (2006).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5024>

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## Center-left Legislators Prevent President Fox From Delivering State Address

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2006-09-06

In an unprecedented move, the members of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) in the newly installed Congress blocked President Vicente Fox from delivering his annual informe (State of the Union address) to the Congress. Fox was unable to present the address when more than 150 PRD and PT deputies and senators took control of the main podium on the legislative floor, effectively blocking the president from reaching the area.

The PRD and PT legislators took over the podium on a cue from Sen. Carlos Navarrete, head of the PRD delegation in the upper house. Navarrete walked up to the podium to repeat allegations that the Fox administration committed electoral fraud in the July 2 presidential election (see other article this issue of SourceMex), which was the signal for the center-left legislators to act.

"This violation of the Constitution cannot be accepted by this Congress," said Navarrete. "Neither I nor my colleagues will abandon [this stage] until those conditions do not exist." Rather than face a confrontation, Fox handed a copy of the report to the president of the Senate, thus meeting his constitutional obligation. He later delivered the address on national television. The PRD and PT are two of the three parties comprising the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos, whose presidential candidate was Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Legislators affiliated with the third coalition partner, the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), opted not to participate in the action against Fox.

Fox's inability to read the informe to legislators makes him the first president in 80 years to depart from the tradition that started in 1825. "Faced with the attitude of a group of legislators that makes it impossible to read the speech I have prepared for this occasion, I am leaving the building," Fox said in the lobby of Congress before walking out. The move by the center-left legislators to block the annual address was an act of solidarity with Lopez Obrador, who lost the presidential election to Felipe Calderon of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) by about 240,000 votes.

Lopez Obrador, who claims Calderon's victory was the result of fraud and illegal campaign practices, has staged a series of major protests in Mexico City (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09 and 2006-08-30). Lopez Obrador had initially planned to lead a group of protestors to the San Lazaro legislative building at the time when Fox was scheduled to present his speech. He later abandoned that plan, choosing not to confront the riot police and soldiers guarding the legislative complex. "We are not going to fall into any trap, we are not going to fall for any provocation," Lopez Obrador told a crowd of about 5,000 followers. "Only those who are not in the right resort to force and violence, and we are in the right."

In making the decision, Lopez Obrador repeated his claim that Mexico's government institutions were corrupt and in need of major reforms. "Let them go to hell with their institutions," he said.

## *Analysts divided on impact of action*

Political observers were divided on the long-term impact of the move to disrupt the address.

Some said the PRD-PT gained a short-term victory by blocking Fox's speech, but the action could prove counterproductive in the long term. "In the PRD's desire to get a little bit of payback because Fox and his candidate beat them at the ballot box, they turned him into the victim," said Ricardo Aleman, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Fox reinforced this in his televised speech. "[The protest by the center-left legislators] was not an affront to me personally but to the office of the president and the Mexican people," said the president.

Other analysts presented an opposing view, saying that blocking Fox's speech was a sign of strength. "Being able to stand up united and prevent the president from delivering his speech shows the strength of the movement," said analyst Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a Mexico expert for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.

The conflict between the PRD-PT and Fox overshadowed the content of the State of the Union report, which in the past has created major debate between the ruling party and members of the opposition (see SourceMex, 1994-11-09, 1998-09-09 and 2005-09-07). There were very few reviews of the televised speech, with commentators choosing to focus on the conflict created by the presidential election. Fox also devoted a portion of his speech to the conflict. "Whoever attacks our laws and institutions attacks our history, attacks Mexico," he said, in reference to the protests led by Lopez Obrador and members of his coalition. "Mexico demands harmony, not anarchy."

The PRD-PT takeover of the podium also prevented Deputy Jorge Zermeno Infante, president of the Chamber of Deputies, from delivering a reply. Zermeno, who, like Fox, is a PAN member, had not planned to respond directly to the president's comments. Instead, the PAN legislator was going to call for social harmony and a spirit of cooperation, pointing out that the current Congress is the most diverse in Mexico's history. (Sources: Reuters, 09/01/06; Notimex, The Dallas Morning News, The San Francisco Chronicle, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, 09/02/06; Los Angeles Times, Excelsior, La Crisis, The Herald-Mexico City, El Universal, 09/04/06; Milenio Diario, La Jornada, 09/02/06, 09/04/06, 09/05/06; Reforma, 09/02/06, 09/06/06).

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