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Congress Approves Changes to Annual State Address

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In early May, the Chamber of Deputies approved changes to Article 69 of the Mexican Constitution that would no longer require the Mexican president to be present in the Congress when giving the annual informe (State of the Union address). The measure was approved 307-39, with strong support from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and other smaller parties. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and its allies in the Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP) voted against the measure. There were 31 abstentions.

The initiative, which allows the Mexican president to present the annual report to the Congress in writing, is expected to gain easy approval in the Mexican Senate. The plan must also be approved by at least 16 of Mexico's 31 state legislatures, since it involves an amendment to the Mexican Constitution. It is not likely that the Senate and at least half of Mexico's state legislatures will approve the changes to Article 69 in time for President Felipe Calderon's second informe on Sept. 1, 2008.

The Congress concluded its spring legislative session at the end of April, and its next regular session does not begin until September. Legislators have scheduled a special session for the summer, but only to discuss reforms to the state-run oil company PEMEX (see SourceMex, 2008-04-30). Without the final approval from the Senate and state legislatures, Calderon will have to appear before the Congress on Sept. 1. The format will probably be similar to that of 2007.

Deputy Emilio Gamboa Patron, coordinator of the PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies, said legislators decided to push for the change in the presentation of the informe because the old format had become outdated. "Mexico has to adapt to modern practices, which means a serious and respectful relationship between the legislative and executive branches," said the PRI leader.

But PRD Deputy Juan Guerra Ochoa countered that the new format would isolate the president from the Congress. "We have to have direct communication between the executive and legislative branches," he said. "We cannot do this through a mere written report." Deputy Silvano Garay Ulloa of the Partido del Trabajo (PT) accused Calderon, Gamboa, and PAN legislative leader Hector Larios of negotiating the reforms only to benefit the president. "They even ruled out a proposal that would have allowed any president who wished to deliver the address in person to appear before the Congress," said Garay.

**Chaotic addresses in 2006, 2007 prompted changes**

Through the years, the Mexican president has traditionally given the State of the Union address on Sept. 1 to an audience of legislators from both chambers of Congress. This changed in 2006, when 150 center-left deputies and senators blocked the main podium on the legislative floor in the
Chamber of Deputies, preventing then President Vicente Fox from delivering the final informe of his administration (see SourceMex, 2006-09-06).

The legislators took the action to protest the 2006 presidential election, which they claimed the PAN won through fraud and illegal campaign practices (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09 and 2006-08-30). 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. This was repeated for President Felipe Calderon's first informe in 2007, with the chief executive making a brief appearance in Congress to deliver a short speech and hand his written report to congressional leaders (see SourceMex, 2007-09-05).

Like Fox, Calderon delivered the full text of his speech on national television. The FAP had also threatened to disrupt Calderon's speech if he had chosen to deliver it in Congress. But legislators from the PRD and PAN avoided a repetition of the ugly scenario from the previous year by negotiating the awkward format for Calderon to present his informe.

The PRI did not take part in the negotiations but readily agreed to the plan. Because of its relatively small numbers in Congress, the FAP has occasionally used a takeover of the legislative floor to press its point on key issues. This year, center-left legislators were able to convince other parties in Congress to hold an extended debate on PEMEX reforms rather than conform to Calderon's timetable to have an initiative concluded by the end of the spring session in April (see SourceMex, 2008-04-30).

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