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Mexico Hopeful That New U.S. Administration Will Pursue Comprehensive Immigration Reform

by LADB Staff

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Changes in the US Congress and the installation of a new US administration have brought renewed hope in Mexico that immigration reform will be enacted in the coming four years. What remains uncertain is the speed with which Congress and President Barack Obama will move to push immigration legislation, which stalled during the administration of ex-President George W. Bush. Supporters worry that immigration might take a back seat to other priorities for the Obama presidency, including the US economy. As did all his rivals seeking the Democratic nomination for US president, Obama came out in support of legalizing undocumented workers who are already in the US after they meet certain conditions (SourceMex, January 02, 2008).

During the presidential campaign, Obama also said he would support some form of a guest-worker program (SourceMex, May 23, 2007), a proposal that Bush also endorsed during his presidency (SourceMex, November 08, 2000 and September 14, 2004). Timing remains uncertain. The Mexican government and US immigrant-rights groups are hopeful that the Obama administration will eventually make a major push to enact immigration reforms, particularly with the support of what is seen as a more friendly Congress. Democrats made moderate gains in the House and the Senate in the Nov. 5, 2008, election, and, with many Republicans also endorsing immigration reform, there is enough support in Congress to get a bill passed. Among those who will push for quick action on immigration reform is the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). As NCLR president Janet Murguia puts it, the organization views immigrant rights as a "civil rights matter." But there is worry the immigration issue will necessarily have to be pushed to the back burner as Obama puts his full attention on resolving the economic crisis during his first year in office.

NCLR officials are concerned about comments made in July 2008 by Rahm Emanuel, who was then a member of the Democratic leadership team in the House. In discussions with NCLR official Juan Salgado, Emanuel said he was pessimistic that any immigration-reform legislation could be addressed in the early stages of the Obama administration. Because of this, NCLR is not counting on Emanuel, Obama's chief of staff, to put immigration reform at the top of the agenda. "We do not see this being part of the strategy of the office that Emanuel will be managing," said Salgado. Other insiders expect the Obama administration's policies in relation to Mexico to continue to focus on drug trafficking and helping shore up Mexico's economy. Ivan Restrepo, Obama's chief advisor on Latin America, said the US would assume greater responsibility in the fight against drug trafficking by taking steps to reduce demand in the US. Restrepo said that, under Obama, the government would also work in close cooperation with the Calderon administration to help support the Mexican economy during the current economic crisis.

Still, Restrepo and others suggested that immigration does not have to be set aside if Obama decides to take more of a leadership role on this issue. "[Obama] committed to work on comprehensive immigration reform during the first year of his administration," Restrepo said in an interview with

the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro) in early November. He added that Obama would seek an agreement with Congress to forge a reform that is "modern, effective, sensible, and respectful of the laws and the rights of all people." Experts agree that the US president could play a huge role in the debate. "If [Obama] can break the stalemate on immigration reform, he could create an environment that is more favorable for bilateral dialogue," said Andrew Selee, director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington.

Advocates hope for more humane treatment of immigrants Advocacy groups are optimistic that greater communication with the Obama government and Democratic leaders in Congress could eventually result in an immigration-reform bill. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, Frank Sharry, director of immigrant-rights organization America's Voice, predicts there will be "a great window of opportunity" between the fall of 2009 and March 2010 to push through immigration-reform legislation. Sharry said there is political momentum for such a bill because the big winners in the 2008 elections were legislators who support immigrant rights, while those who are less friendly to immigrants were either defeated or weakened. The promise of immigration reform, however, does little to help the situation for many beleaguered immigrants. "Despite a certain optimism among defenders of migrants...life for immigrants in general, but especially those who are undocumented, has gone from bad to worse," said La Jornada. "The dozens of roundups of undocumented immigrants during 2008 generated a climate of fear," said the newspaper, pointing to cases such as the one in Postville, Iowa, in May, where authorities used military equipment to round up 389 undocumented workers at a local meatpacking plant (NotiCen, January 08, 2009).

There is also going to be pressure for the Obama administration and Congress to maintain, if not strengthen, many of the border-security measures implemented during the Bush administration. But the Obama administration is expected to adopt a less punitive stance, including scaling down plans for the border wall supported by the Bush administration and many senators and representatives. Immigrant-rights groups have appealed to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano to suspend construction of the 1,150-km wall, although a large portion of the barrier has already been completed. Mexico must do its part Specialists on immigration in Mexico say the onus is on the Calderon government to take advantage of the change in Washington. "It is up to us to create the mechanisms to lobby the US government to ensure that Mexico's interests are not trampled," said Susana Chacon, a researcher at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM), who was part of a team of Mexicans invited to observe the US presidential and congressional elections.

Chacon suggested that Mexico has a better opportunity for change with Obama in office than if Republican candidate John McCain had been elected. "With McCain, a change in agenda would have been very difficult. Issues such as drug trafficking, organized crime, human trafficking would have been addressed in much the same way as they are now," Chacon told the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma in early November. "Obama's election offers an opportunity for us to accomplish much more," added the ITESM researcher. "But since we're not currently the focus of US foreign policy, we are responsible to ensure that we get the attention we want." Calderon has yet to hold comprehensive discussions with Obama regarding Mexico-US relations.

The Mexican president held a brief telephone conversation with Obama shortly after the US election and invited him to visit Mexico. "And he gladly accepted the invitation to visit our country," the Mexican president told reporters, although he did not mention a specific date or time period. Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa, also speaking to reporters shortly after the US election, expressed confidence that bilateral efforts initiated during the Bush administration would continue with Obama. In particular, she mentioned drug-interdiction efforts via Plan Merida (SourceMex, June 11, 2008). "Mexico places great importance on the continuity in cooperation against organized crime, which is a challenge that requires a sustained effort," said the secretary. Calderon and Obama held a brief meeting at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington in mid-January. In the meeting, which lasted only a couple of hours, the two leaders addressed a host of bilateral issues, including anti-drug efforts, immigration, border security, and the global financial crisis.

In comments to reporters, Obama said other themes that were discussed were the need to revisit the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Mexico's advances in energy and climate change. "The prospect of us working together on energy strategies across borders is going to be critically important," said Obama. The meeting was seen more as a courtesy visit ahead of Obama's inauguration than as a building block in relations between Mexico and the US. Still, Calderon expressed optimism that Mexico and the US would be able to strengthen their relationship in coming years. "I believe it can be even stronger, and that's going to be the commitment of my administration," the Mexican president said following the meeting. Remittances fell in 2008, could drop even further in 2009. Calderon, who is halfway through his six-year term, would like to see comprehensive immigration reform before he leaves office in 2012.

It is very possible that the US might not address this issue in the near term because of the economic crisis. But there are other ways in which Mexican immigrants might benefit from actions by the US government, such as Obama's economic-stimulus proposals, which place a strong emphasis on creating and preserving jobs in the US. The construction sector, the source of employment for many immigrants, is one of the areas of the US economy that has been hardest hit by the recent crisis. "[The emphasis on jobs] is something that is crucial for both our economies," Calderon said in comments to reporters at the meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in late November. The loss of jobs for many Mexican expatriates in the US has already had a deep negative impact on the Mexican economy.

Preliminary estimates from Grupo Financiero Banamex Citigroup indicate that remittances, Mexico's second-largest source of foreign exchange after oil exports, fell by about 2% in 2008 to about US\$23.5 billion. If the estimates hold, the decline would not be as severe as had been anticipated earlier in the year (SourceMex, September 17, 2008), but it is still the first decline since 1995. In 2007, expatriates sent an estimated US\$24 billion to Mexico. The Banco de Mexico (central bank) said the decline in remittances is particularly affecting nine states, which receive almost two-thirds of the money sent back home by expatriates. These states are Michoacan, Guanajuato, Mexico state, Jalisco, Puebla, Veracruz, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and the Federal District (Mexico City).

The trend is expected to continue in 2009, with projected declines varying widely. Banamex-Citigroup is projecting a modest decline of about 2.5% this year, but others like the Instituto

Mexicano de Ejecutivos de Finanzas (IMEF) foresee a decline of as much as 15%. "This sounds like a huge drop," said IMEF president Pedro Nunez. "But the job losses in the US are hitting the Latino community especially hard." Because of the loss of jobs and the lack of new opportunities, some rural groups projected in late October that as many as 1.5 million expatriates would return to Mexico during a three-month period from November through January. "The large exodus is going to test the Calderon government, which will have to provide jobs, education, and services," said Carlos Villanueva, president of the Asociacion Mundial de Mexicanos en el Exterior. The organization represents 788 expatriate groups in the US. "The majority of these returning expatriates will be going back to communities in the poor areas of the country."

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