

4-22-2009

Chamber Of Deputies Holds Three-day Session To Discuss Legalizing Marijuana

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Chamber Of Deputies Holds Three-day Session To Discuss Legalizing Marijuana." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5298>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Chamber Of Deputies Holds Three-day Session To Discuss Legalizing Marijuana

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-04-22

The Chamber of Deputies resurrected the controversial question of whether marijuana should be legalized in Mexico, with debate coming just days before US President Barack Obama was scheduled to meet with President Felipe Calderon and other administration officials to discuss joint efforts to address drug trafficking. The lower house took up the issue of legalizing marijuana during a three-day forum on April 13-15, primarily at the request of the Partido Social Demócrata (PSD). Legislators did not intend for the session to result in an immediate vote but wanted to gather as much testimony as possible to help them make the decision down the road. The issue came up before in the Mexican Congress in 2006, when it voted on an initiative by then President Vicente Fox to decriminalize personal consumption of certain drugs including marijuana (SourceMex, May 10, 2006).

Facing strong pressures from opponents, including the US government, Fox vetoed the same bill that he had proposed. Deputy Mariana Arvizu, who heads the five-member PSD delegation in the 500-member Chamber of Deputies, said the forum intended to revisit some of the arguments presented during the 2006 debate as well as to emphasize certain socioeconomic factors related to drug usage in Mexico. "[The forum] sends a message that the Chamber of Deputies is concerned about this difficult issue and is looking for alternatives," said Arvizu. She said that the legalization proposal should be considered in the context of the drug-trafficking problems that Mexico has experienced in recent years. "We have to look at the cost benefit of the prohibition on marijuana," said Arvizu, who said that legalizing marijuana would remove some of the profit incentives for drug traffickers.

Furthermore, she said, current policies punish poor farmers who grow the crop to put food on their table. Key members of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democrática (PRD) also came out in favor of an initiative that would decriminalize some marijuana-related activities. Deputy Javier Gonzalez Garza, PRD floor coordinator in the lower house, proposed decriminalizing possession of a small amount of marijuana. "There are not enough jails to hold everyone who breaks the possession law," said Gonzalez, who also heads an important committee in the lower house.

Opinions remain mixed. Reactions from the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) were mixed. Deputy Adrian Fernandez spoke in favor of decriminalizing marijuana, but the party as a whole expressed its opposition to that proposal. PAN legislators indicated concern that legalizing marijuana would do little to marginalize the drug cartels. The Secretaria de Gobernación (SEGOB) agreed with the PAN delegation's concerns while acknowledging that current laws need to be revisited. "A regulatory regime that imposes full prohibition has not solved all our problems," said SEGOB official Blanca Heredia. "At the same time, it would be an illusion to think that complete legalization of cannabis would be a panacea." Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova also testified against legalization of marijuana, saying its use can lead to harder drugs. "Specialists have

demonstrated that a person who starts out on one type of legal drug, such as alcohol or tobacco, is 13 times more prone to using illegal drugs," he said.

Carlos Rodriguez Ajenjo, director of the government agency that deals with addiction (Consejo Nacional contra las Adicciones, CONADIC), said that legalizing marijuana would cause an increase in usage. "This would create a public-health problem and lead to increased social violence," said the director of CONADIC, which is a unit of the Secretaria de Salud (SSA). Other CONADIC officials clarified the agency's position. "We are not against individual use of marijuana. It is not our mission to promote sanctions," CONADIC official Armando Patron Vargas told Congress. "But we believe the improper use of marijuana could be harmful to users." Still, other prominent figures favored some decriminalization of marijuana, including ex-Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000).

Zedillo, along with former Presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil and Cesar Gaviria of Colombia, are founders of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy (Comision Latinoamericana sobre Drogas y Democracia), which favors decriminalizing personal consumption of marijuana. The commission also includes several intellectuals from Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Mexico. In addition to Zedillo, the other Mexican on the commission is political scientist and historian Enrique Krauze.

In a report cited at the three-day forum, the commission said that prohibition policies "have not produced the expected results." Therefore, the report recommended that "personal consumption of marijuana should be decriminalized." Decriminalizing marijuana received tacit support from unexpected quarters. Daniel Caram, director of Mexico's social security institute (Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, IMSS), said that Mexico should not criminalize those who consume drugs. But he declined to say specifically whether he supports congressional proposals to legalize marijuana. Many observers said the issue is too complicated for Congress to rush into simple solutions. "Experts who participated in this forum...emphasized that this is an issue as complex as abortion or the death penalty, an issue in which Mexico lacks adequate research," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

Discussions regarding Mexico's marijuana policies extended beyond the San Lazaro legislative building. Appearing on the CBS network's Face the Nation, Mexico's Ambassador to Washington Arturo Sarukhan said the debate on legalizing marijuana is legitimate. "There are proponents and opponents on both sides of the border," Sarukhan told interviewer Bob Schieffer. "I think that those who would suggest that some of these measures be looked at understand the dynamics of the drug trade, that you have to bring demand down, and that one way that you can do it is by moving in that direction, but there are many others that believe that by doing this, you would only fan the flames." The ambassador added, "This is a debate that needs to be taken seriously, that has to be that we have to engage in on both sides of the border, both in producing, in trafficking."

US reiterates opposition Sarukhan's comments prompted White House correspondents to ask about the administration's position. "President Obama does not believe that legalization is going to solve the problem," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, who noted that the US president has opposed similar initiatives in the past. Officials from both countries offered no hint on whether

Obama and Calderon discussed the congressional proposal during their meeting in Mexico City, but there were plenty of statements from US officials ahead of the visit.

Anthony Placido, assistant administrator and chief of intelligence for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said legalizing marijuana or other drugs would do little to drive the cartels out of business. "The legalization of drugs in Mexico, as anywhere else, will lead to more misery, with addiction and organized crime moving to other areas," said the DEA official. One of the biggest concerns for the US government is that legalizing marijuana in Mexico would result in a heavy influx of US citizens to that country for the purpose of consuming the drug. It was partly because of US government pressure that ex-President Fox vetoed the drug-legalization bill that he had promoted in 2006.

There is also strong concern in Mexico that marijuana consumption could explode if the drug were made legal. Even though Mexico is a major marijuana producer, its consumption levels are about one-tenth of those in the US. Statistics released by the US Department of Justice in 2003 showed that about 12.6% of the US population between 15 and 64 years of age consumes marijuana. This compares with 1.3% for Mexico, 16.8% for Canada, 11.3% in Spain, and 1.9% in Colombia.

Obama, Calderon meet in Mexico City to discuss drug-related issues

Whether or not marijuana legalization was discussed during Obama's meeting with Calderon, the overarching issue of drug trafficking and related issues, such as arms trafficking, was a major theme of their discussions. The meeting was very brief because both leaders were scheduled to participate in the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago on April 17-19 (NotiCen, April 23, 2009). Because of the brevity of the encounter, the two leaders used the meeting to touch base and exchange points of view on issues, which included trade and the economy in addition to matters related to drug trafficking.

Mexican officials reiterated their requests that the US do more to stop the flow of high-caliber weapons and funds obtained from drug trafficking from the US into Mexico. "It is essential that we make the US see the need to fully assume shared responsibility in this fight," Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said ahead of the US leader's visit. "The Obama visit is a chance to cement new cooperation." Obama repeated his promise to continue efforts to curb the flow of weapons into Mexico. "I have not backed off at all from my belief that the assault-weapons ban makes sense," the US president said at a news conference. "Having said that, I think none of us are under any illusion that reinstating that ban will be easy, and so what we focused on is how we can improve our enforcement of existing laws" making it illegal to traffic guns to Mexico.

As a first step, the US administration announced a plan in March to increase inspections at the US-Mexico border (SourceMex, April 01, 2009). As a next step, Obama plans to ask the US Senate to ratify the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and other Related Items. The treaty, negotiated through the OAS in 1998, was signed by former US President Bill Clinton, but not ratified by the Congress. "The president felt it was important to push now for the ratification of the treaty because the question of illegal arms trafficking is of great concern," a senior official told The New York Times. "The

president believes that taking the necessary steps to ratify conveys our commitment to addressing this challenge."

-- End --