

5-13-2009

Swine Flu Outbreak Affects Mexico's Internal Politics, Relations With Other Countries

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Swine Flu Outbreak Affects Mexico's Internal Politics, Relations With Other Countries." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5303>

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.

Swine Flu Outbreak Affects Mexico's Internal Politics, Relations With Other Countries

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-05-13

The outbreak of the H1N1 virus in Mexico has affected the country's political dynamics in two important ways by possibly influencing electoral campaigns ahead of the July 5 vote for congressional seats and other offices and by worsening already tense relations with China and, to a smaller extent, other Latin American countries. Although authorities have eased emergency restrictions imposed at the end of April, the situation continues to keep Mexicans on edge. As of May 10, the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) had confirmed more than 2,000 cases of H1N1, or swine flu, with 59 deaths attributed to the virus.

Analysts are still uncertain about whether the flu outbreak will affect the July 5 vote, but the situation could well be on the minds of voters as they go the polls in less than two months. The elections could affect President Felipe Calderon's ability to govern, with all 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies up for grabs. At present, Calderon's Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) holds a plurality of those seats. Other important races include six gubernatorial elections and several important mayoralties, including Guadalajara and Monterrey, Mexico's second- and third-largest cities. In addition, 11 states will be electing new state legislatures.

Outbreak could have some influence on July elections

For many observers, the flu outbreak's impact on the election will depend on how President Felipe Calderon's administration is perceived to be handling the crisis and whether the health emergency worsens the country's economic problems. There were a myriad of responses from the public to the administration's response to the crisis. For a couple days, Calderon seemed absent from the scene, with most comments and directives coming from Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova. The president's early absence prompted many critics to accuse Calderon of lacking leadership.

In addition, there were questions on whether the administration took sufficient precautions that might have prevented the outbreak and whether its immediate response was sufficient to avert the spread of infection. The government's ability to react more quickly was hampered by the lack of proper equipment and facilities to conduct tests (SourceMex, April 29, 2009). Conversely, the administration did take prompt and decisive actions in the aftermath of the outbreak, including closing schools and other public places for an extended period, which was met with approval from the public.

Jose Antonio Crespo, an analyst at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economicas (CIDE), said early polls showed support for the government's actions. The president displayed some political savvy by giving credit to local authorities for preventing a wider spread of the disease. "Without a doubt, the timely and decisive reaction of everybody, of all levels of government in our country, has saved not only thousands of lives in Mexico, but it has allowed the rest of the world to take the right

measures and prepare themselves better, with a long lead time, with more information to face this epidemic," said Calderon in a televised press conference following criticisms that he had remained invisible during the crisis.

Among those who had to make the tough decisions was Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who had the largest number of suspected cases of H1N1 in his jurisdiction. Ebrard, who has had an arms-length relationship with Calderon, broke his longstanding practice of not meeting the president on his turf and joined a meeting called by the president with all the governors. Ebrard is part of a faction of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) that believes Calderon and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) stole the 2006 presidential election (SourceMex, September 06, 2006 and September 20, 2006).

Until the meeting with Calderon, Ebrard, considered a likely presidential candidate in 2012, was holding separate press conferences and announcing decrees to address the flu epidemic. After the initial outpouring of support for the government response, Mexican citizens were hearing news reports that the H1N1 flu might not be as severe as originally thought. This prompted some grumbling among citizens who suggested that the government might have overreacted. Pollster Roy Campos, president of Consulta Mitofsky, wondered whether the flu outbreak would have any lasting impact on the Mexican political scene. "Besides saving lives and promoting new investments in the health sector, who does this crisis benefit?" he asked. At this point, said Campos, the impact is difficult to predict. "A relatively low number of deaths will make it seem like the government's measures were exaggerated," said the pollster in a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Economista*. "A high rate would have proven [the government measures] insufficient." Campos said another factor in the flu's impact was that the outbreak occurred during an economic crisis. "The economy was already experiencing a loss of jobs, low tax collections, and slow growth, and this crisis could worsen the economic emergency," he said.

Mexico City shoulders the blame

The health scare also seemed to widen a traditional animosity between Mexico City and the rest of the country. With a large share of the flu cases concentrated in the capital and surrounding states, there was strong resentment outside the area to the decision to extend emergency measures to the rest of the country. While residents of Mexico City took extreme measures such as wearing masks in public, such was not the case in places like Monterrey. "The city's taco stands were jammed as always. Couples kissed in city parks, people gathered at barbecues, and children flocked to ice cream parlors," said the Associated Press. When the federal government ordered all nonessential businesses to close for five days beginning [May 1], authorities in Monterrey had to drag people from bars and discos," added the AP report. There were reports that some Mexico City residents, rather than stay in their homes during the emergency, took advantage of a "long vacation" to travel to places like Acapulco. This worried residents in those areas that they would become infected by the visitors. In one instance, a crowd in Guerrero state stoned two vehicles that had license plates from Mexico City.

On May 11, more than two weeks after restrictions were imposed, the capital and other parts of Mexico were returning to some semblance of normalcy. Primary and secondary schools and

universities were allowed to reopen after buildings were thoroughly disinfected. Six states delayed reopening schools until May 18. Although 150 flu-related deaths were reported in Mexico early in the process, the SSA said the number of confirmed deaths attributed to the H1N1 virus was only 59 as of May 11. More than 2,000 people were confirmed to have contracted the virus in Mexico, which are almost half the 4,500 confirmed cases in 29 nations. Only five deaths related to the flu had occurred outside Mexico through May 11 three in the US and one each in Canada and Costa Rica.

Crisis hampers political campaigns

While the direct impact of the crisis on the political parties might not be known until after the July 5 election, there was already an effect on the campaign process, which kicked off officially on May 3. There was some concern that citizens would not pay much attention to the campaigns, given the country's emergency situation. "The start of the campaigns is going to be entirely anticlimactic because of the flu outbreak," said an analysis from Consulta Mitofsky in the aftermath of the outbreak. The health crisis severely hampered the ability of candidates and parties to conduct traditional campaign rallies. As a result of the outbreak, the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) recommended that all candidates seeking federal, state, and local offices take extraordinary precautions during public events, such as using antibacterial gel, avoiding shaking hands, and refraining from kissing babies. More importantly, the SSA discouraged rallies larger than 40 people. This meant that much of the campaigning would have to be conducted either on television or radio.

With the government in the hands of the PAN, little impact was anticipated on the opposition Partido Revolucionario (PRI), which was playing a very low-key role during the crisis. The PRI had been widely expected to make big gains in this election because of strong dissatisfaction with the PAN (SourceMex, February 18, 2009 and April 15, 2009). A poll by Mitofsky in April, before the flu outbreak, measured party identification of the electorate. About 31% of respondents said they identified with the PRI, another 26% expressed preference for the PAN, and 15% for the PRD. A separate poll by Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal in May found similar results: 32.6% in favor of the PRI, 26% supporting the PAN, and 9.5% behind the PRD.

Still, Calderon retained strong personal popularity in the midst of the crisis, which is the case for most Mexican presidents while they are still in office. This could keep the PAN from sustaining significant losses in the election. The biggest prize in the July election is the Mexican Congress, and some analysts interpret the increased identification with the PRI ahead of the 2006 presidential election as a sign that the opposition party could make at least moderate gains in Congress.

At present, the PAN holds 207 of the 500 seats, followed by the PRD with 127 and the PRI with 106. The PRD works in collaboration with two other smaller parties, the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), giving the center-left coalition 147. The PRI often votes in concert with the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), which has 17 seats in the lower house. The parties' performance will be measured not only by the number of seats they win in the Congress but also how they perform in key gubernatorial and mayoral races. Of the six states holding elections, four (Sonora, Nuevo Leon, Colima, and Campeche) are in the hands of the PRI, while the two others (San Luis Potosi and Queretaro) are governed by the PAN. Polls indicate that the PRI could well retain its four governorships and could compete strongly for the two held by the

PAN. The PRD is not likely to make big gains in the top races, but its strength could be measured on how it performs in smaller mayoral races and state legislatures.

Chinese restrictions anger Mexico

Although there are divisions among the parties ahead of the election, a unifying factor for Mexicans during the flu outbreak was the negative reaction to Mexico from many countries. Mexicans have directed their anger especially at China. While many countries imposed restrictions on visiting Mexicans, Chinese authorities took extreme measures, with authorities seeking out and rounding up Mexican tourists and other visitors, many of whom showed no signs of flu. Seventy-one Mexican visitors were confined to Chinese hotels and hospitals, and many were taken physically in the middle of the night for testing. While measures by authorities in China and Hong Kong which is now under Chinese control appeared to be an overreaction, some experts suggested that Chinese officials were acting based on their experience with an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Asia in 2003 (SourceMex, May 14, 2003). The outbreak killed 700 people.

Still, the reaction of Chinese authorities angered the Mexican government, which accused China of disregarding accepted public health practices. "We are concerned about the situation in China, where Mexican citizens were isolated without any signs that they had the virus," said Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinoza. "These are discriminatory acts." The Mexican government dispatched a commercial aircraft to repatriate the 71 citizens who had been quarantined by the Chinese government. Chinese officials denied that they were discriminating against Mexicans. A spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry said the concerns expressed by the Mexican government were understandable, but the spokesperson urged Mexican authorities to "be understanding of the measures adopted by China and handle this matter objectively and calmly." The World Health Organization (WHO) supported China's actions indirectly. "We know closures of borders, restrictions on people, goods, and services will not slow down [virus] transmission," Margaret Chan, WHO director-general, told the Financial Times. "If countries see fit, imposing quarantining would not contravene our recommendations."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon offered a different position, saying he opposed "exaggerated reactions" without justification in the effort to control the spread of the H1N1 virus. These actions, he said, would cause unnecessary social and economic damage. The secretary-general's statements were also in reference to actions by China, Russia, and other countries to ban the importation of pork from Mexico, the US, and Canada when there is no evidence whatsoever that the swine flu is transmitted through meat consumption. "Decisions should be adopted only based on scientific data or on experience," said the UN official. "Any that do not use these criteria should be rescinded."

The rumors of links between the virus and meat consumption have not scared off Chinese consumers. "We did see a dip in both pork prices and demand in the first week" after news of the outbreak appeared in the Chinese media, Ben Baoke, executive vice president at China's fourth-largest pork producer, told Bloomberg news service. "Yet both demand and prices have recovered to levels prior to the outbreak." There was also some resentment in Mexico toward other countries in Latin America for their actions following the flu outbreak. Four countries Argentina, Peru, Cuba, and Ecuador suspended all flights from Mexico.

In Chile, players from the Mexican soccer team Guadalajara, which was involved in the prestigious Copa Libertadores, complained that opposing fans were taunting them with remarks about the swine flu during the game. Guadalajara and fellow Mexican team San Luis withdrew from the Copa Libertadores after two rivals in the tournament, Sao Paulo of Brazil and Nacional of Uruguay, declined to travel to Mexico to play matches against the Mexican teams.

-- End --