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Deportations of Mexican Citizens Set to Break Record during U.S. President Barack Obama’s Administration

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Undocumented Mexican immigrants in the US, uncertain whether Congress will finally consider immigration-reform legislation in 2014, are facing high deportations, including deportations of many men and women who have been in the US longer than 10 years. And, as Mexicans fight to stay in the US, they are also making demands on the Mexican government—namely the right to make their votes count in Mexican elections.

Immigrant-rights organizations say deportations of Mexicans have surged during the current administration, approaching a record of 2 million people since US President Barack Obama took office in 2008. The latest data from Mexico’s immigration agency (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) indicates that 332,000 Mexican nationals were deported in 2013 to nine locations in the border states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Sonora.

Deportations decline slightly in 2013

While deportations remained high, the total for 2013 showed the first decline during the Obama government. In 2012, the US repatriated almost 369,000 people to Mexico.

The decline in deportations in 2013 is attributed in part to a change in focus for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which has placed more attention on detaining and removing serious criminals, whose cases take more time to process, said agency officials.

The Obama government has also enacted the Dream Act, a policy that allows undocumented immigrants who were brought to the US as children, graduated from US high schools, and who have lived in the US at least five years prior to enactment of the measure, to apply for protection from deportation.

"They have, by policy, exempted so many cases from their priority hierarchy that they are just looking the other way at the majority of the illegal aliens that their agents are encountering," said Jessica Vaughn, director of policy studies at the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies (CIS).

ICE officials emphasized that 98% of the people deported in the 2012 fiscal year fit into the agency's priorities of removing criminals, recent border crossers, and repeat immigration violators. "We will continue our efforts to focus on the removal of criminals and recent border crossers, promoting public safety, border security, and the integrity of the immigration system," acting ICE Director John Sandweg said in a recent conference call with reporters.

Some immigrant-rights advocates contend, however, that many of those deported have been in the US 10 years or longer. "Innocent, hard-working people are being deported. "They are mothers and fathers, children and youth," said Francisco Moreno, director of the Consejo de Federaciones Mexicanas en Norteamérica (COFEM). "We are working by all means necessary to stop these deportations, particularly through the promotion of an immigration-reform law."
The INM said the deportees during 2013 included almost 17,000 minors, of which 14,000 were not accompanied by an adult. "In all cases, officials from the agency Protección a la Infancia (OPI's) offered immediate assistance, providing medical care, food, clothing, and lodging," said the INM.

**Political dilemma for Obama**

Despite the decline between 2012 and 2013, the Obama government remains under strong criticism from immigrant-rights advocates for the high deportation rate and for his inability to deliver on his promise to push comprehensive immigration-reform legislation through Congress.

The high deportation rate represents a political dilemma for Obama, who continues to push for comprehensive immigration reform (SourceMex, May 8, 2013). His tough stance on immigration is intended to gain the support of Republicans, many of whom are not convinced that the president is committed to immigration enforcement.

On the other side of the coin, Democrats and immigration-rights advocates are criticizing the president for adopting an overly tough stance on this issue. Critics point out that the total number of deportations during the Obama government during six years in office would match the 2 million total recorded during the two terms of his predecessor, ex-President George W. Bush.

Many would like to see the president expand the deferred-action program or halt deportations until Congress settles immigration reform that could allow some people to stay legally. The US Senate approved an immigration-reform measure in July 2013, but many in the US House have objected to provisions in the legislation, which has stalled passage (SourceMex, July 10, 2013). "He does have the power to stop deportations, and we will keep challenging him," Cristina Jimenez, managing director of United We Dream, told The Huffington Post. "But we’re not just pressuring President Obama; our country needs a permanent solution and our families deserve a path to citizenship with permanent protections."

In December 2013, more than two dozen Democratic members of the House signed a letter asking Obama to stop deporting people who might qualify for legal status and citizenship should an immigration-reform bill pass.

**Expatriates seek to expand voting rights in Mexico**

While immigrant-rights groups are pushing for more humane policies from the US government, some organizations are also lobbying the Mexican government to ease the rules for expatriates living in the US and other countries so more expatriates can participate in Mexican elections.

The Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME), led by Elvia Yolanda Torres y Carlos Arango, is pushing for the Mexican government to enact political reforms that allow migrants to obtain voting credentials with greater ease and to vote electronically.

The Mexican Congress granted expatriates the right to vote in 2005 (SourceMex, July 27, 2005), but only those who have current electoral credentials can cast a ballot by mail. For many Mexicans, obtaining a voting credential has become a bureaucratic nightmare. As a result, only about 60,000 of the 12 million Mexicans residing outside the country are eligible to participate in federal elections.

The IME is proposing that changes to the law allow expatriates to obtain their voting credentials at 50 consulates and the Mexican Embassy in the US and that a system be set up for voters to cast their ballot electronically. Torres says the process has not been easy because of a lack of cooperation from
the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "I see a step backward in Enrique Peña Nieto’s government," said Torres. "There has been no reply to our request. We are almost invisible."

Still, some changes have already been proposed in the Mexican Congress. Deputy Raúl Gómez Ramírez, secretary of the migration affairs committee (Comisión de Asuntos Migratorios) in the Chamber of Deputies, is seeking to replace mail-in votes with electronic voting.

Gómez Ramírez, a member of the opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), said many democratic countries around the world have managed to implement modern and secure systems that allow expatriates to vote electronically, and there is no reason why Mexico cannot take similar steps.

"We cannot continue to consider our expatriates second-class citizens," said Gómez Ramírez. "These are people who contribute to the well-being and the growth of their country of origin as well as the one where they currently reside. They deserve political rights."

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