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Carlos Navarro

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Mexico Welcomes US President Barack Obama's Executive Order on Immigration

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexican officials welcomed US President Barack Obama's decision to issue an executive order allowing certain members of the undocumented-immigrant community to legalize their status in the US. The new action, which mainly applies to unauthorized immigrant parents of US citizens or legal permanent resident children, would benefit those born in Mexico more than any other country-of-origin group. According to the Pew Research analysis, 44% of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico could apply for deportation protection under the new programs, compared with 24% of those from other parts of the world.

In the aftermath of Obama's decision, Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary José Antonio Meade Kuribreña described the US president's executive order as a "far-reaching move" that would bring forth a qualitative change in the manner in which the US government interacts with undocumented immigrants. "We cannot downplay the impact that [this decision] will have on the dynamics affecting migrants, both in the US and in their country of origin," Meade Kuribreña said in a speech in Mexico City.

Under the plan announced by Obama, a total of 4 million unauthorized immigrants would become eligible for protection from deportation and a three-year work permit. The Pew Research analysis found that the largest group—at least 3.5 million—consists of unauthorized immigrant parents who have lived in the US for at least five years and have children who either were born in the US or are legal permanent residents. Of these, about 700,000 have adult children and the remaining 2.8 million have children younger than 18. The estimates are based on data compiled in 2012.

The new policy also expands eligibility for the president's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that benefits young adults brought to the US illegally as children. By some estimates, the program would allow an additional 330,000 people to apply for and receive temporary deportation relief. "Previously, the program was available only to those up to age 30, but the executive action would lift that age cap," said the report from the Pew Research Center. "In addition, the program would allow immigrants who arrived as children illegally before Jan. 1, 2010, to become eligible, expanding the program beyond the original June 15, 2007, cutoff date."

Meade said Obama's action represents a "recognition" of the contribution of migrants to the community at large. The move, he said, "enables that community of migrants to come out of the shadows and continue contributing in an even more productive way to the country that received them."

"We welcome [this decision] without any ambiguity," said Meade, who noted that the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) is prepared to supply migrants in the US with the documents they need to comply with the new immigration policy.

Republican opposition

While the plan put forth by Obama has gained strong support from the Mexican government, some critics in Mexico suggest that the move falls far short of the comprehensive immigration reform needed to protect the rights of Mexicans residing in the US.

"This lukewarm measure will face obstacles in a US Congress dominated by Republicans, who have an even worse stance on this issue," columnist Félix Cortés Camarillo wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior*.

Republicans in the US Congress responded to Obama's executive action by threatening to withhold funding for programs in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in charge of implementing the president's executive order, during end-of-the-year budget deliberations. There was some thought of withholding funding for a wide range of programs, but that action could become a political liability for congressional Republicans.

Other than the funding threat, there is little that Congress can do at this point to reverse the president's action. As far as future actions, congressional Republicans are said to be planning legislation for the next session of Congress to strengthen the US-Mexican border to discourage illegal immigration.

Obama has other ideas of how Congress could become involved in immigration policy. In an address to activists and entrepreneurs in Nashville, Tennessee, in early December, the president urged US legislators to approve an overhaul of the US immigration system. Such a move, he said, would eliminate the need for his executive actions that shield millions from deportation. "This isn't amnesty or legalization or even a path to citizenship," he told the audience in Nashville. "That can only be done by Congress."

"If you want Congress to be involved in this process, I welcome it," Obama added. "But you have to pass a bill."

In addition to the threats by congressional Republicans, a coalition of 17 US states led by Texas has filed a lawsuit to halt the executive order. The lawsuit—filed in US District Court in Brownsville, Texas—names the heads of the top immigration enforcement agencies as defendants.

Outgoing Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott, who was recently elected governor of the state, said Obama was "abdicated his responsibility to faithfully enforce the laws that were duly enacted by Congress and attempting to rewrite immigration laws, which he has no authority to do."

Alabama, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Mississippi, and Maine also joined the lawsuit.

Responding to the news of the lawsuit, Meade noted that the unilateral action on immigration taken by Obama was done according to the prevailing US law. "We have no legal elements of the specific lawsuit. It seems to us that it's a measure (done) according to law, that will benefit an important community," said the foreign relations secretary in an interview with the Spanish news agency EFE.

Mexico offers support to region

Meade said the Mexican government was trying to do its part to help the situation by going after the gangs engaged in migrant smuggling. Furthermore, he said, President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration has also strengthened the network of shelters for Central American migrants being brought illegally through Mexico by smuggling organizations.

In the aftermath of Obama's executive order, Mexico plans to use its role as president pro tempore of the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), also known as the Puebla Process, to discuss a regional strategy on migration. The regional nature of migration came to the forefront this year with the news that the number of unaccompanied minors from Central America—primarily from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—had increased significantly this year ([SourceMex, June 25, 2014](#), and [July 23, 2014](#)).

Deputy interior secretary Mercedes del Carmen Guillén Vicente will coordinate the Mexican government's leadership efforts at the next session of the RCM, scheduled for January 2015. All seven Central American countries—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama—are part of the CRM. The three other members are the US, Canada, and the Dominican Republic. Argentina, Colombia, Jamaica, Peru, and Ecuador have observer status.

On its Web site, the RCM says the conference focuses on three areas: migration policy and management, human rights, and migration and development.

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