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Fox talk defends democracy

Mexico's leader delivers last state of nation speech

Morgan Lee

Associated Press

Sept. 2, 2005 12:00 AM

MEXICO CITY - President Vicente Fox used his state-of-the-nation address Thursday, the last before elections to replace him, to urge citizens to stay committed to Mexico's newfound democracy and to remind them that they are in charge of the nation's future.

Fox urged Congress to work with him, saying "agreement is the transforming force of history."

"We have built too many walls and few bridges," he said, and then was interrupted by catcalls. "This harms the popular will and discourages citizens. Now, more than ever before, it is essential that politics should constitute the basis of our democratic system."

He especially singled out the electorate, praising women, young people and the nation's vast and diverse Indian population and reminding them repeatedly that they are in control. He also hailed the newly approved absentee ballot law, which will allow migrants to cast votes from abroad for the first time ever.

"The citizens' hours has come," he said. "Now, more than ever before, citizens are taking the country's destiny into their own hands."

Opposition lawmakers, who spoke before Fox's arrival, listed the president's many unfulfilled promises and failures during his nearly five years in office, arguing that their parties could do a better job.

"It's time for change, for real hope, and this time, we will achieve that," said lawmaker Pablo Gomez of the leftist Democratic Revolution Party, whose presidential hopeful, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, is leading polls.

Enrique Burgos of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled Mexico for 71 years until Fox's surprise victory in 2000, criticized the president for weakening the executive branch.

"What in reality has failed is the management of public policy," Burgos said.

The criticism continued after Fox took the podium, with lawmakers heckling and even interrupting his speech by whistling and holding up banners, as they have in past years. Some greeted the end of the presentation with calls of "Where is the report?"

Fox's conservative National Action Party defended the president, urging an electorate increasingly focused on the presidential campaign to not lose sight of economic and democratic advances.

"Democracy, like life, is hard to learn and doesn't have a teacher," National Action lawmaker Jose Gonzalez Morfin said.

Fox's is prohibited by law from seeking a second term in 2006, but he is closely watching the July 2 presidential race.

Political parties will begin choosing presidential candidates later this month, kicking off the campaign.

The speech "is really Fox's last chance to make his pitch, speak his piece," said political analyst Federico Estevez, at Mexico City's ITAM university. "And after this, he'll just be the guy that's there . . . but everything else will have shifted."

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