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For Mexico's Fox, a 'Revolution' Unfulfilled

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MEXICO CITY -- Five years after his historic election on July 2, 2000, as President Vicente Fox enters the twilight of his term and the nation moves toward elections next year in which he is not eligible to run, even his critics say he has made government more honest and transparent, fortified the economy and championed democracy.

But the idea of Fox as a revolutionary, a powerful figure who would energize and modernize a nation long strangled by corrupt and authoritarian government, has died. And many of his closest advisers say that despite his image, Fox succumbed far earlier than anyone realized, and sooner than they wanted to admit at the time.

Several advisers said that within weeks of the election, major problems emerged, including Fox's distaste for confrontation and his rejection of get-tough politics with the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which ruled Mexico for seven decades until Fox became president. In addition, he was nearly paralyzed by concern that adversaries, if provoked, could destabilize the economy with strikes or protests.

Within a year, the advisers said, the bold promise of his administration had all but evaporated.

"The Fox revolution died in the transition," said Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, a key aide to Fox and architect of his presidential campaign, referring to the five months between his election and inauguration.

One exchange offered a glimpse of why Fox's promised revolution -- to slash crime, create millions of jobs and supercharge the economy by reforming antiquated tax, labor and energy laws -- never got off the ground, key aides and outside observers said.

In June 2001, six months after Fox took office, a group of his closest aides requested an emergency meeting at his ranch. They feared that his promised "revolution of the 21st century," along with his presidency, was sinking.

"You are not doing the job; you are deserting us," said Aguilar Zinser, who later served as Mexico's ambassador to the United Nations until Fox dismissed him for his criticism of U.S. policies.

The aides told Fox he was being too soft on the PRI, which was now strangling his key reforms in Congress. They told him it was time to play hardball, and they proposed a plan: scrutinize the finances of 100 PRI officials and threaten to expose their corruption.

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"Let's give them options: leave the country or go to jail," Aguilar Zinser recounted in an interview before his death in a traffic accident earlier this month.

The president shook his head.

"I am not God," Fox said, according to Jorge G. Castañeda, a former top aide and foreign minister. "Who am I to draw up that list?"

"This is not going to work," Castañeda remembered saying in frustration. "We're losing too many battles."

Fox, in an interview aboard his presidential plane earlier this month, insisted he had succeeded in bringing far-reaching change to Mexico.

"The revolution to me was breaking the 70 years of authoritarian dictatorship," he said, recalling his election night, when Mexicans danced in the streets.

Fox likened himself to Lech Walesa, whose election as president of Poland was a historic blow against Soviet communism, but whose transition from crusading candidate to head of state was "not very smooth." Fox said his own shift from fiery campaign rhetoric to a more cautious approach as president was simply the pragmatism of an executive whose party held a minority in Congress.

When Fox took office, full of swagger and standing 6-foot-6 in his trademark cowboy boots, perhaps no Mexican political figure had ever so captivated both Mexicans and millions of people in the United States, many of whom for the first time knew the name of a Mexican president.

Now, as Fox nears his 63rd birthday, his black hair and mustache are tinged with gray, his wrinkles are deeper and his big grin is slower to appear. Back surgery a couple of years ago forced him to trade his big boots for sensible, flat shoes.

"My government is not a failure," he said, his voice rising over the roaring jet engine just outside the window. "You don't build up a country in six years. Mexico was so far behind that we will need a generation to solve all the problems completely."

Asked whether he felt overwhelmed by the office, he responded vehemently.

"Never, never, never. That's not what made me change," Fox said. "Many people still ask me: 'Where are the boots? Where is your language and your messages of before?' . . . But being president is different from being candidate. It's more prudence, more tolerance. Being a president, a minority president, I am more obliged to . . . reach consensus and agreements. So, that's what I have to work at. Everything would have been different with this story if I had had a majority in Congress."

Still, Fox acknowledged that his early coalition-building efforts with the PRI had yielded few results. Was it the right call?

"That's a decision that history will have to judge," Fox said. "Up to now, it seems that it was not the right decision. But if I were to go back, I would still keep on trying the option of plurality and alliances. I'm absolutely at peace in my conscience that I did well for the country."

Protecting His Popularity

Shortly after the election, Fox's transition team began meeting at a private house at 607 Reforma, a tree-lined boulevard where Fox's second-floor office overlooked a lush garden.

In one of the first meetings, Castañeda recalled, the campaign received a gift. He said outgoing President Ernesto Zedillo had privately signaled that he was willing to seek increases in electricity rates and gasoline prices before he left office, creating a potentially huge revenue infusion for Fox's first budget.

Castañeda was delighted that Zedillo, a Yale-educated economist who had fallen out with his own party, was offering to take the political hit for an unpopular move.

But Fox would have none of it.

"No, no," Castañeda recalled Fox saying. "We don't want to start off with unpopular measures."

"It was the first warning sign," Castañeda said, recalling his concern that a newly elected leader was unwilling to take risky but needed moves. "I said: 'Gee, wait a minute. We've got a problem here.' "

Fox, in the recent interview, said Zedillo had made no such offer. A source close to Zedillo, however, said the former president had done so.

There were many instances in those early months, Castañeda said, when Fox recoiled at the notion of doing anything that might damage his popularity ratings.

During the campaign, Fox had made bold promises. He would create millions of jobs and lift up the poor. He would win a new immigration deal with the United States. He would change outdated labor and tax laws to attract investment. He would overhaul education. He would expose and punish the corruption that undermined Mexico's government and judicial system.

Marketing and Governing

Lino Korrodi, Fox's former campaign finance chief, has known Fox since 1967, when they were both starting out at the Coca-Cola Co., where Fox rose to become the company's top executive for Mexico. Korrodi said he had always thought of Fox as almost superhuman and fearless. But after becoming president, Korrodi said, Fox suddenly seemed to show "a lack of determination."

Korrodi, who left the administration after allegations that he had helped channel illegal contributions to Fox's campaign from abroad, said Fox "changed completely" and seemed "smaller" after he arrived at Los Pinos, the presidential residence.

"There are two Foxes I'm talking about," Korrodi said. "The Fox who made it to 2000, and the Fox who, on getting to the door of Los Pinos, took off his boots."

Aguilar Zinser said he observed the same contrast in September 2000, when the transition team went to a beautiful old hacienda in Cocoyoc, a weekend resort town south of Mexico City.

One morning, Aguilar Zinser said, the team entered a meeting room where a vast organizational chart of the sprawling federal bureaucracy had been posted on a wall. He recalled that Fox looked increasingly alarmed

as he studied the web of ministries and agencies dealing with matters from spying to fisheries.

"Is this what I have to manage?" Fox said, according to Aguilar Zinser.

Mexico's lumbering, often corrupt bureaucracy might have buried any new leader's ambitions, and Fox seemed particularly daunted. Castañeda said part of the problem was that Fox had not really expected to win, so he was not prepared to rule. A revealing moment, he recalled, was when he heard Fox telling Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain in 2001 that he enjoyed being a candidate much more than governing.

Aguilar Zinser said Fox was effectively marketed to the nation as a new product.

"The product was a mustache, a hat, a belt, the boots and a brand name," he said. "It was all identified with a bottle, a Coca-Cola bottle. And Fox was very comfortable being a bottle."

But faced with the challenge of governing, Aguilar Zinser said, Fox suddenly seemed uncertain of his role and unable to grasp the power of the presidency.

"We did not want to acknowledge it in the beginning, but when we looked into the bottle, we said, 'My God, it's empty.' "

Dealing With the PRI

A few days after Fox took office, he approached Carlos Rojas Magnon, a lifelong friend who was handling administrative issues in the presidential office. He held out a list of journalists and media companies that were receiving monthly payments from the presidency, a long tradition that helped shield PRI politicians from criticism.

"Get rid of it," Fox ordered.

Rojas said he explained that cutting off the journalists' payments would anger them, and that this would surely color their coverage of the new president.

"Well," Fox said, "one day it has to be done, and today's as good a day as any."

To Rojas, the moment was an example of Fox's accomplishments. He said the president's efforts to end corrupt ties and make public spending transparent -- in a nation where predecessors could legally spend millions in secret -- were indeed "revolutionary."

Ironically, it was the new transparency that forced Rojas out of government. When a Web site on government expenses showed the presidential residence had been outfitted with \$400 towels, Rojas took the fall. But he and Fox remain close, and he began an interview by saying, "I love this man."

During the PRI era, both Fox and his aides had endured humiliation and worse. Rojas was jailed for painting anti-PRI slogans on a wall. Fox lost a 1991 gubernatorial election in which fraud by the PRI was alleged. Aguilar Zinser said he was kidnapped from his office by PRI thugs in the early 1980s and taken to a military base where he was blindfolded, beaten and had his head repeatedly submerged in a toilet.

While some PRI officials were honest, others rigged elections and looted the treasury to subsidize lavish lifestyles. Party officials also were implicated in the killings of rivals.

Once Fox was elected, however, he gave important jobs to PRI members. Rojas said he could not believe it. At one transition team meeting, he said, he protested to Fox: "What the hell are we doing with all these guys from the PRI in the government?" But Fox, he said, went on about the need for consensus.

"It was not easy to take," Rojas recalled.

Rojas said he believed that Fox at times "did not exercise the kind of leadership that was necessary." Fox failed to control his cabinet members, he said, and disagreements descended into public bickering. But Rojas said the problem was most obvious with Fox's handling of the PRI.

Fox's election had devastated the PRI. Its leaders were quarrelling openly and its financial picture was so grim that party leaders even discussed selling some landmark buildings. The party appeared in danger of splintering. Rojas argued that this was not the time to ease up, saying old-guard PRI loyalists would respect only force.

"When you have your opponent hanging in the ring, you finish him," Rojas said. "You don't hold time for 10 minutes so that he can recuperate." Fox "should have finished them in the first months. But it's not in his nature."

Fox, however, said he was just doing what was "prudent." In a country that in 1994 had suffered a major economic crisis that crushed millions of Mexicans, he said the "drums of war" approach advocated by some of his advisers made no sense. "Stability," he said, was his "number one ingredient" during the transition.

Fox also knew that the PRI still controlled many labor unions and was capable of creating destabilizing strikes or even violence. Some aides said they also suspected that Fox had struck a deal with wealthy business leaders who bankrolled his campaign, promising not to provoke the PRI. Mexico's elite worried that a war between Fox and the PRI could scare off foreign investment and sink the stock market.

"I think Fox didn't know what to do with the PRI," said Dulce Maria Sauri, a senator who was PRI president in 2000. "During the campaign, it was very useful to paint the PRI as the devil. But to govern, that was not enough. Fox's plan was to get the PRI out of Los Pinos, but then he didn't know what to do. He opened the door to the transition, but then he stood there paralyzed in the doorway. He wasted his political power."

Defending His Legacy

Fox's plane touched down in Veracruz state on the Gulf of Mexico. It was a brutally muggy day earlier this month and Fox took the podium in a sweltering concrete warehouse in the port city of Coatzacoalcos to address a crowd gathered for Mexico's annual Navy day.

Four and a half years earlier, wearing a crisp business suit and the green, red and white presidential sash across his chest, Fox had delivered an inaugural address filled with soaring oratory, promising to make dramatic changes and to "keep alive the call of hope."

Now, his graying hair and white guayabera shirt were soaked with sweat. The sunburned president began a long defense of his administration's performance as a few hundred sailors and civilians fanned themselves in the heat. He railed against "radical opponents" in the PRI who had blocked his plans to reform the justice system, taxation, fiscal policy, labor laws and energy laws.

He spoke of new highways and housing complexes, of new pension and health plans for workers, of how Mexico was now making its debt payments on time.

"This is a responsible government," Fox said.

He mentioned Mexico's devastating economic crash of 1994, clearly proud that his government had not suffered a similar disaster. He appeared to be measuring his legacy more by what he had avoided than by what he had achieved.

"One of the great changes and transformations in our country is this: economic stability, political stability and social stability," Fox said. "We are not going to put that at risk."

It was a businesslike, pragmatic speech. Gone was the reach-for-the-stars rhetoric that once inspired his followers. Instead, his flat list of accomplishments could barely compete with the humility for the audience's attention.

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