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Vicente Fox has had a disappointing reign

The star's view: The first Mexican president to be elected outside the Institutional Revolutionary Party has been unable to impose reform and keep promises.

Mexican President Vicente Fox is a lame duck, with the next presidential election scheduled for July of next year. But in a sense, Fox became a lame duck not long after he started housekeeping at Los Pinos, the presidential residence.

He is the first president who was not a member of the PRI - the Institutional Revolutionary Party. That is because Fox's predecessor, Ernesto Zedillo, injected much-needed democratic procedures into the Mexican presidential process.

The result was that Fox, a member of the business-oriented and more conservative party, PAN, won the election in 2000 with about 43 percent of the vote.

His closest rival, PRI candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa, attracted but 36 percent, a poor showing for a party that had been in charge for about 70 years.

The singular accomplishment of Fox's administration has been to highlight the immigration of Mexican workers to the United States.

Before Fox, the PRI and presidential administrations looked askance at the problem, refusing to discuss the issue as billions of dollars flowed from undocumented workers in the United States to their families in Mexico.

As he took office, Fox had a leg up on the issue because of his relationship with the also newly elected President George W. Bush.

As the governor of a border state, Bush had a more enlightened view of illegal immigration. During the first year both presidents were in office, the discussions centered on the need to provide some legal status to undocumented workers in the United States.

The attacks by al-Qaida on Sept. 11 put immigration reform not simply on a back burner, but off the table and locked in a closet.

And today there is but the remotest chance for reform, as immigration has become an issue that elicits extreme reactions in this country.

When he was elected, Fox had a thin majority of PAN members in the national Congress. But that did not endure, and Fox was often thwarted by a government still permeated by thousands of PRI officials and bureaucrats.

Fox also hurt his record by making promises he could not keep. He swore to develop a plan to eliminate corruption. He would introduce a system of checks and balances, identify and reform agencies that were riddled with cronyism and abuses.

He said he would create a commission to counter corruption in the federal government. And he promised to clean out the attorney general's office, which then was widely considered to be a handmaiden of the drug cartels. Fox also promised to reduce the huge drug trade.

Five years later, the Fox administration has made hardly a dent in these problems. The emptiness of his promises became clear earlier this month when drug runners murdered the new police chief of Nuevo Laredo, Alejandro Dominguez, shooting him more than 30 times. He had been on the job all of nine hours.

Nuevo Laredo has been a primary venue for a bloody battle between two drug gangs. More than 60 people, including police officers, have been killed.

During his tenure, Fox also attempted to impose some tax reform - mainly a uniform value-added tax, but that effort was unsuccessful. Meanwhile, certain industries are sheltered from competition, which has made the Mexican economy less efficient.

Fox's election will remain a seminal event in Mexico's history. But five years later, it demonstrates that democracy alone doesn't lead immediately to justice and that reform in Mexico is very much a work in progress.

- S.A.

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