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Mexican Lawmakers Block Fox's Speech

Foes in Congress Seize Chamber

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Washington Post Foreign Service
Saturday, September 2, 2006; A01

MEXICO CITY, Sept. 1 -- In a historic rebuke, opposition lawmakers seized control of Mexico's congressional chamber Friday and blocked President Vicente Fox from delivering his final State of the Nation address.

Fox, who was adorned in Mexico's green, red and white presidential sash, stood awkwardly in the chamber's foyer for nearly 10 minutes before conceding that he had no chance of entering. Surrounded by bodyguards, Fox was handed a microphone. He quickly said that he would leave and gave a copy of his speech to a legislative official.

The lawmakers who commandeered Mexico's congressional building are aligned with the Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, and its candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is demanding a full recount of the July 2 presidential election results.

The bizarre scene played out live on national television. After giving up any hope of delivering his speech, Fox turned and left the building with Mexican first lady Martha Sahagun, who had donned an evening gown for the occasion. Fox smiled and nodded, while Sahagun chatted with the crowd that formed around them outside the building, which had been ringed by riot fencing and was guarded by 6,000 police officers. Then they disappeared into a waiting sport-utility vehicle.

The incident deepened an ongoing political crisis in Mexico, where the dispute over the election to replace Fox has brought massive protests and chaos to Mexico City's downtown. More than any event in the past two months, the congressional takeover seemed to signal that López Obrador could create an effective opposition that would make life miserable for Felipe Calderón, the candidate from Fox's party who has apparently won the presidency by a narrow margin.

The night's strange events were also sure to add to the checkered legacy of Fox, who improved the transparency of government but failed to achieve the revolutionary economic gains that he had hoped for after ending seven decades of one-party rule in Mexico with his victory in 2000.

Instead of a grand farewell on Friday, Fox became the first Mexican president not to deliver a State of the Nation address to Congress. He also found himself further entangled in a seemingly intractable post-election controversy that his opponents say he has stoked by calling the demonstrators who are demanding a recount "rebels."

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López Obrador, a populist former Mexico City mayor who has led the demonstrations, claims that fraud allegedly committed by Fox's National Action Party is responsible for his apparent narrow loss. After refusing López Obrador's request for a full recount Aug. 6, Mexico's special election court is expected to certify Calderón's victory within days.

Things began to spool out of control minutes before Fox's arrival at the congressional building. PRD lawmakers rushed the stage in Mexico's legislative chamber, which was draped with a huge Mexican flag, while Chamber of Deputies President Jorge Zermeno tried in vain to get them to return to their seats.

The lawmakers chanted "vote by vote, polling place by place," repeating a rallying cry that López Obrador and his supporters have plastered on posters for the past two months. Some waved signs that said "Fox is a traitor," and others lofted Mexican flags.

Their shouts could be heard in the distance as Fox climbed the building's steps and stood before the glass doors leading from the foyer into the chamber. While the PRD lawmakers chanted, Fox shook his head and grimaced. Finally, he nodded his head and a cheer burst out of the chamber.

"This is a scandal," Alejandro Rosas, a historian, said during one of the many news programs that filled the airwaves with shocked commentary after the incident.

More than an hour after retreating from the congressional building, Fox appeared on television in what appeared to be a pre-taped address to the nation, complete with cutaway shots of street scenes and him presiding at government events. The television appearance, though, was later overshadowed by heated debate about his inability to deliver his speech to Mexican lawmakers.

In the State of the Nation speech, Fox had planned to tout his accomplishments and to take a broadside at López Obrador, who has said Mexico's new democratic institutions -- including its election commission and special election court -- are failures.

"In a democratic Mexico, the engine of change is citizens' votes, not vetoing institutions," Fox's speech read, according to a text distributed by his office.

Fox's departure from the legislative building, which is in the poor San Lazaro neighborhood of Mexico City, capped a strange sequence of events that captivated this city. First, thousands of police officers in riot gear surrounded the legislative building, anticipating a full-frontal assault by thousands of López Obrador supporters.

The masses of protesters never materialized. Dozens of street vendors who had anticipated a big crowd stood idle on the streets leading to the building. Police officers practiced using their shields to block violent demonstrators, squatting and rising repeatedly. With nothing better to do, many drifted toward the vendors, then marched back to their positions eating popsicles.

While the police waited for an onslaught that never came, López Obrador convened his latest in a series of dozens of "informative assemblies" in the large downtown square, the Zocalo, where thousands of his followers have been camping for the past month.

"Only the unjust resort to violence," he told the crowd.

More important, he told supporters to stay in place instead of marching to the legislative building as everyone had expected. The crowd cheered wildly, hanging on every word from López Obrador, who has vowed to form a parallel government and not accept Calderón's ascendancy to Mexico's highest office.

López Obrador's crowds had slackened in recent weeks, but on Friday there was a renewed sense of energy as thousands of college students, recently returned from summer break, poured into the square. López Obrador pounded the lectern, having once again seized center stage.

While López Obrador spoke, and later as Fox was being turned away, Calderón -- the man who will soon likely lead this country -- was nowhere to be seen.

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