

Antics disrupt Mexico's Congress

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MEXICO CITY - Legislators from an opposition party shoved, shouted and climbed atop the speaker's platform for three days running last week, preventing congressional debate on a bill they oppose.

The circus-like performance that culminated Thursday undermined the already low public standing for Congress and forced its leaders to put off debate until Tuesday, making for a solid week of legislative paralysis.

The leftist Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD, has led the protests against a proposed constitutional amendment that would force Mexico City - which they govern - to spend much of its budget on education costs now covered by the federal government.

PRD officials argue the bill is being rushed through without adequate study. They also say the measure is an attack on Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who leads polls ahead of the 2006 presidential elections. It would force major cuts in the public works projects and handouts that have helped boost the mayor's popularity.

The party's tactics have embarrassed and outraged other members of a Congress that has been trying to assert a newfound confidence and dignity.

Battle for the microphone

After decades of serving as a rubber-stamp legislature dominated by the presidency, Mexico's Congress since 1997 has evolved into an opposition-dominated body likely to snub presidential plans.

"We totally reject this violence and lack of respect for Congress," said Francisco Barrio, a congressman for President Vicente Fox's conservative National Action Party.

Congressman Jesus Emilio Martinez agreed, saying: "When a congresswoman takes over the speaker's chair, that's just a joke."

He referred to the widely televised image of two PRD congresswomen trying to claw a microphone from the hands of Speaker Manlio Fabio Beltrones, then shoving a placard into his face as he tried to preside over Congress.

Beltrones bellowed that the male PRD legislators were "cowards" for sending women to attack him.

After he quickly suspended the session and rose from the chair, PRD Congresswoman Dolores Padierna wedged herself into it, only to face chants of "Corrupt!" - a reference to her husband Rene Bejarano, a politician who was videotaped stuffing his pockets with a businessman's cash.

Tougher action promised

Beltrones told a local television station Friday that he would take tougher action against any future disruptions. Asked if he would file a complaint against Padierna, he replied, "Vulgarity is not considered a crime."

On Tuesday, Padierna won permission for Mexico City legislators to attend the session. They shoved aside guards and seized the speakers platform.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party, Mexico's largest, said this week's protests "put Mexico's democracy at risk, and create a climate of violence."

But Ethel Riquelme, Congress' public relations chief, acknowledged that even before this week's protests, studies showed about 80 percent of Mexicans had little faith in Congress.