

A Quirk in Mexican Law Could Keep New President From Traveling Abroad

The Washington Post
January 5, 2007;

MEXICO CITY -- The Mexican presidency comes with some nice perks -- a grand residence called Los Pinos and a plush jumbo jet dubbed the Presidente Juárez.

But getting the Presidente Juárez into the air isn't always easy. A quirk of Mexican law forces presidents to seek congressional approval every time they want to visit another country. If Congress says no, the president is stuck at home.

This could be a problem for [Mexico's](#) new president, Felipe Calderón, whose predecessor and political ally, Vicente Fox, was twice grounded by Congress shortly before leaving office in December. Calderón's National Action Party, which holds a minority of seats in Congress, is trying to change the law before he suffers similar humiliation at the hands of a hostile lawmakers.

Just five weeks into his six-year presidency, Calderón is already at odds with the legislature. A pack of opposition lawmakers booed and got into a fistfight with Calderón allies while trying to block his Dec. 1 inauguration. The crankiest have vowed to make life miserable for the president any time he wants something from lawmakers, and the hold they have over his travel could be just the weapon to make him look bad.

"It's very embarrassing," said Rossana Fuentes-Berain, a Mexico City political analyst and editorialist. "We have teenage behavior going on, and anyone who is around teenagers knows it is very hard to deal with them."

Calderón's allies are concerned about potentially embarrassing situations -- the president being forced to decline an invitation to the White House, for example, or to explain to the Spaniards that he cannot make it to Madrid.

"I'm sure they're going to mess with him," said Ana María Salazar, a Mexico City political analyst who was born in Mexico and served as a top anti-drug official in the Clinton administration. "He's going to have to be very careful and very deferential."

Congress has already proved it has no qualms about grounding the president. Threats from legislators forced Fox to back out of trips to the United States and Canada in 2002 at a time when many Mexican officials were upset with him for getting into a diplomatic spat with Cuban President Fidel Castro.

But Fox's most embarrassing travel moment came in November when Congress said no to trips to Australia and Vietnam. Columnists had speculated that Fox wanted to go to Australia only to visit one of his daughters, who was living there. The Vietnam rejection meant Fox had to bow out of the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

Fox's spokesman called legislators "childish and petty," and the president went on national television to complain that the decision hurt Mexico. But Congress didn't budge.

Neither side emerged untarnished, analysts here say.

"Look, we don't trust the legislators to be responsible, and I don't think we trust that the president is using these trips responsibly," Salazar said.

Mexico's presidential travel law has its roots in an era when international communication was slow and unreliable, and lawmakers wanted to limit the time the country was left without its chief executive. But with the advent of international cellphones, videoconferencing and the like, Fuentes-Berain says, the law feels "outdated" and makes Mexico look "provincial."

Calderón's congressional backers are seizing on that sort of public sentiment. Sen. Adriana González Carrillo, who is sponsoring the bid to change the law, said it was critical because "Mexico's presence in the world should be greater."

Showdowns over Calderón's travel are expected any time he asks to go to the United States, where fights over Mexican immigration are boiling. In the meantime, he has won preliminary approval for two low-profile trips: a visit to Nicaragua for next week's presidential inauguration of Daniel Ortega and another to [El Salvador](#) later this month for a ceremony commemorating the 15th anniversary of the end of that country's civil war.

Before taking office, Calderón went on a whirlwind international tour, taking advantage of a loophole that ensures Congress has no authority over a president-elect's travel. He touched down in [Brazil](#) and Guatemala and had a White House sit-down with President Bush.

Since taking office, Calderón has kept close to home. He recently traveled to the U.S.-Mexico border for a photo op with Mexicans streaming back into the country for the Christmas season. But while Mexicans flowed both ways across the border, Calderón stayed on Mexico's side of the line.