

Pictures of Fox ranch raise questions

The Miami Herald
Sep. 20, 2007

MEXICO CITY --

Photos in a Mexican celebrity magazine have opened a window on Vicente Fox's post-presidential life and prompted a cynical public debate about political enrichment under Mexico's often-praised, relatively new democracy.

The magazine, *Quien*, published a cover story this month on Fox and former first lady Martha Sahagun at their newly renovated ranch, complete with a pool, artificial lake and expansive gardens.

Mexican newspaper columnists and radio hosts immediately questioned whether the former leader had earned enough as president to afford such luxuries, raising the specter of corruption that had clouded many earlier Mexican administrations.

"Anyone who gets to the presidency ends up with way more than he had before, while the poor and working class are the always left behind," said 66-year-old newspaper vendor Roberto Pedroza, who earns about \$11 a day.

While Fox's ranch is modest in comparison with the ostentatious estates of many wealthy Mexicans, it is still viewed with suspicion by many who equate power with corruption, and offends some in a nation where most people struggle to feed, clothe and house their families.

One of the most outspoken critics has been Lino Korrodi, the finance manager for Fox's 2000 presidential campaign. Korrodi, who later had a falling-out with his friend, said the ranch was a mess before Fox became president because he didn't have the money to maintain it.

"It is evident he got rich during his six years in office, in a very shameless and cynical way," Korrodi said in comments published Wednesday by the newspaper *El Universal*. He even called for a congressional investigation, an idea opposition lawmakers are studying.

The report put Fox on the defensive Thursday in Rome, where he was elected co-president of the Centrist Democrat International, an association of center-right parties from around the world.

Fox repeatedly refused to respond to reporters' questions about the issue, although he issued a statement Wednesday saying that "ethics, transparency and full accounting have been the permanent norm throughout my entire life."

The former Coca-Cola executive said in the statement that he has always lived, and will always live, on his ranch, which he inherited from his parents.

"This is something I declared and showed way before I began my life as a public official," he said.

Fox struggled in business ventures and drained his savings while serving as a congressman and state governor with the conservative National Action Party, which made decades of attempts to win the presidency until Fox's historic election in July 2000. That ended 71 years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party and certified Mexico's status as a democracy.

But it apparently didn't change the Mexican tradition of cynicism about outgoing presidents.

Fox earned \$245,000 a year as president, and since leaving office in December, he has received a presidential pension of nearly \$270,000 a year.

He has also followed other former world leaders such as Bill Clinton onto the lucrative lecture circuit and is planning a donation-funded presidential library near his property.

Mexico expert George Grayson of the College of William & Mary said Fox's wealth is small compared with the massive fortunes of former presidents such as Jose Lopez Portillo and Carlos Salinas, whose brother, Raul, was discovered to have more than \$100 million in European banks.

"The political class in Mexico live extremely well, and I would say this is par for the course," he said. "In fact, (Fox) appears to be a bit more abstemious than several of his predecessors like Salinas and Lopez Portillo who really did milk the public cow to fatten their own bank accounts."

Fox's replacement, Felipe Calderon, also of National Action, cut the presidency's annual salary by 10 percent as part of a government-wide cost-savings program.