

# Mexico enacts broad electoral reform

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MEXICO CITY --

A broad electoral reform that infuriated Mexico's broadcast industry by barring political parties from buying radio and television advertisements will take effect on Wednesday.

The reform attempts to level the political playing field by requiring television and radio stations to broadcast 48 minutes of free political advertising each day and forbidding parties from buying their own air time. In past elections, there was no limit on how many ads political parties could buy.

It also limits presidential campaigning to three months before election day, and forbids political parties from insulting political institutions and candidates.

Mexico's two major television broadcasters denounced the political ad provision, but said they were more concerned the requirement that stations give opponents the "right to reply," which they said could chill free speech.

Mexican laws already restricted private campaign contributions, and parties receive most of their financing - US\$350 million last year - from the government. In the 2006 election, at least 56 percent of campaign spending went to TV and radio ads, according to Mexico's Electoral Institute.

The constitutional amendments, approved by Congress and then by a majority of Mexico's state legislatures, were much desired by followers of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who claimed he actually won last year's tight presidential race.

They call for the wholesale replacement of the Federal Electoral Institute, a big-spending, semi-autonomous agency that doles out public campaign funds, organizes elections and enforces campaign laws. Lopez Obrador's backers accused the head of the institute, Luis Carlos Ugalde, of helping tilt the 2006 election to President Felipe Calderon, an allegation he has repeatedly denied.

Ugalde and other critics of the new law say they worry it will erode the independence of the institute, which was created in 1990 to clean up Mexico's once notoriously fraudulent elections. Congress now has 30 days to approve companion legislation and replace the institute's board.