

Will Bush find anti-Chávez ally in Mexico's Calderón?

The US eyes the right-leaning Mexican president as a bulwark against Latin America's leftist tide.

The Christian Science Monitor
March 12, 2007

MEXICO CITY - While President Bush's visit here Tuesday with President Felipe Calderón isn't expected to break new ground in US-Mexican relations, it's an important stop at the end of Mr. Bush's weeklong tour that became a contest in influence with his leftist rival in Venezuela, Hugo Chávez.

At the same time Bush has been traveling to five nations in Latin America, Mr. Chávez has taken his populist agenda on tour through the region to counter American influence. And, say analysts, the US is eyeing Mr. Calderón as a leader who can bolster US-backed ideals in the region.

"For the most part I think the Bush administration sees Mexico as a country that can be showcased to the rest of the hemisphere, particularly at a time when you have Chávez traveling all over Latin America trying to promote his own model," says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Calderón and Bush certainly share the same free-market principles, say analysts. In January, Calderón urged foreign businessmen to invest in his country, as opposed to others in Latin America.

"While other governments in the world and Latin America are thinking about expropriating or seizing your investments, in Mexico we are thinking about how to give guarantees to increase investment in our country," he said.

Yet if the Bush administration wants Calderón to stand up to the so-called "leftist tide" in Latin America, Calderón can't win by appearing to cozy up to the US, says Dan Lund, a Mexico City pollster for Mund Americas. Former Mexican President Vicente Fox "was groomed to play that role" and in the end he came off as a "buffoon," he says.

In an interview with the Associated Press on Saturday, Calderón rejected the idea of leading Washington's anti-Chávez front. "I am not interested in playing a role with Bush in that respect," he said. "The United States has a lot to do to regain respect in Latin America."

The two leaders will meet Tuesday in Merida, Mexico, and security issues and trade are expected to dominate the talks.

Calderón has won accolades from the US for his massive antidrug effort launched in December in Mexico, weeks after assuming the presidency, as well as for the extradition of alleged cartel leaders to the US.

"The single most important item is security," says Rafael Fernandez de Castro, chairman of the international studies program at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM). "The US administration is very concerned about the US-Mexico border and about some areas in Mexico in which criminal organizations and drug traffickers operate literally without law."

On trade and migration reform, analysts expect little movement.