

Mexico Tries a Slower Path To Changes on Immigration

Strategy Includes Strengthening Domestic Job Market

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MEXICO CITY -- When President Bush lands in the Yucatan colonial city of Merida on Monday night, he will encounter a new Mexican government that wants the same thing the old one wanted: comprehensive immigration reform in the United States.

What's different is that Mexican President Felipe Calderón, in office since December, is trying a slower and subtler approach. Calderón and his lieutenants have even invented a buzzword to define their strategy, saying they will "desmigratizar" the bilateral agenda, or remove immigration from the forefront of U.S.-[Mexico](#) relations.

"He's having to find a new vocabulary," said Juan Hernández, who headed a cabinet-level office for Mexicans living abroad during the administration of Calderón's predecessor, Vicente Fox.

Calderón has spoken out against U.S. border policy, calling border fences "deplorable" and predicting that security measures will lead to an increase in migrant deaths. Still, the president's top aides say he is convinced that, to achieve immigration reform, he must demonstrate to the U.S. Congress that Mexico is willing to address the factors propelling illegal migration, especially the country's weak job market and low standard of living.

The president is also pressing for human rights reforms on his nation's troubled border with Guatemala, in an attempt to avert accusations that Mexico has mistreated migrants.

Given the dimensions of Calderón's challenge -- the minimum wage is \$4.60 a day and the World Bank estimates that more than 40 percent of Mexicans live in poverty -- his allies say they do not expect to produce enough tangible results to spur immigration reform in the United States during the final two years of the Bush administration.

"Maybe we won't succeed in the near term, but we could succeed in the medium term," Alejandro Landero Gutiérrez, a member of Calderón's National Action Party who serves on the foreign relations committee of the Mexican Congress, said in an interview. "We're building this brick by brick. Our expectations are much more reserved."

Calderón visited Bush at the White House in November, during a pre-inauguration international tour. "I didn't come to the United States looking for Americans or this country's government to solve problems we have in Mexico, which we will have to solve on our own," he said after the meeting.

Since he took office, Calderón's biggest initiative has been a far-flung effort to crush drug cartels, whose barbaric turf wars have discouraged tourism and foreign investment. He has sent Mexican troops and federal police to resorts, such as Acapulco, and to hot spots along the border, such as Tijuana and Monterrey.

While the military offensive has produced mixed results -- there have been some arrests, but violence persists -- Calderón has also been encouraging foreign investment. He

recently proposed inviting international companies to bid on contracts to build private toll roads, which could create thousands of jobs.

He is also pursuing a domestic agenda aimed at curbing emigration by improving social services and generating jobs. In January, Calderón launched a program that will give cash incentives to companies that hire first-time job holders. His administration also projects spending 6.7 percent more on education this year than Fox's did last year, 26.8 percent more on public health and 27.6 percent more on social development programs, according to statistics provided by Landero Gutiérrez.

"In marginalized communities, after paying for the basic costs of education, health care and food, people are left with nothing, and they're forced to migrate," Landero Gutiérrez said.

But shifting the focus away from immigration is not a simple endeavor. U.S. immigration policies have made Bush profoundly unpopular in Mexico and other Latin American countries. A Zogby International poll published in January by Newsweek magazine indicated that two-thirds of prominent Mexicans -- including politicians and business people -- view relations with the United States as "poor." In the meantime, there are strong pressures in Mexico to find ways to improve living conditions -- and perhaps attain legal status -- for the estimated 6 million Mexicans living illegally in the United States.

Dan Lund, a Mexico City pollster, said Calderón, whose party falls well short of a majority in Congress, is hampered by "a divided house" on the question of how much emphasis to place on immigration. Jorge Castañeda, who was foreign minister under Fox and famously said Mexico wanted "the whole enchilada" of immigration reforms, has disagreed, calling Calderón's strategy "foolishness."

While de-emphasizing immigration reform, Calderón has also given signals that he won't stop trying to cajole American lawmakers. Before leaving for the United States, Calderón's new ambassador to Washington, Arturo Sarukhan, told reporters that Mexico would use its U.S. diplomatic corps to lobby for reforms.

"We are going to put into place the same kind of diplomatic and lobbying effort that we did in the early 1990s when NAFTA was being decided," Sarukhan said last month, referring to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Calderón has sometimes departed from his strategy of shifting immigration out of the spotlight in U.S.-Mexico relations. In July, during his first news briefing, he attacked proposals to build more fences along the border.

As months passed, his rhetoric became even stronger. During a visit to Canada in October, Calderón said, "Humanity committed a grave error by constructing the Berlin Wall, and I am sure that today the United States is committing a grave error in constructing a wall along our northern border."