

Mexico president blasts 'stratospheric' supreme court wages

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Associated Press, Fox News, December 9, 2018

MEXICO CITY –



Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador holds his first news conference as president, which started at 7 a.m. local time in Mexico City, Monday, Dec. 3, 2018. Mexico's newly inaugurated president hit the ground running Monday with his pledge to govern as a common man and end decades of secrecy, heavy security and luxury enjoyed by past presidents. (AP Photo/Christian Palma)

The Mexican president is butting heads with the Supreme Court just one week into office after judges suspended a law that would cap public sector salaries, one of his key campaign promises.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador accused the judges of looking after their own pocketbooks and of failing to grasp the "new reality" that his administration represents. The salary cuts are part of a rebalance in government that aims to raise wages for lower income workers while chopping those of top officials.

"They themselves decide that they are going to keep receiving exaggerated, stratospheric salaries - salaries of up to 600,000 pesos (\$29,000) a month - those who impart justice," Lopez Obrador complained to reporters Saturday, before repeating one of his favorite mantras: "There can't be a rich government with a poor people."

The freeze throws into question the government's 2019 budget plans, which are due on Dec. 15. The suspension is pending a definitive ruling by the court.

The Mexican Congress decreed in November that, with few exceptions, no public employee should earn more than the president. Lopez Obrador's Morena party has a majority in both houses of Congress. The National Human Rights Commission then asked the court to review the law, saying it appeared to violate the constitution.

Lopez Obrador slashed the presidential salary by more than half when he took office on Dec. 1, to 108,000 pesos (\$5,300) a month.

Mexico has the lowest wages of any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, with a net income per capita of \$1,281 per month.

The proposed salary cuts have caused great uncertainty for many public sector workers, with those who can leaving posts for jobs in the private sector.

Lopez Obrador said Saturday that he expects the legislative branch to have the final say on salaries, since they approve the annual budget.