

WebMemo



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Getting Beyond Mexico's Contentious Election

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Mexican voters got more than they bargained for in national elections held Sunday, July 2, the second democratic presidential vote since the 2000 contest ended seven decades of single-party rule. While a substantial turnout—60 percent of registered voters—and a very close result guaranteed public anxiety, questionable fraud charges have unleashed a bizarre powerplay.

After the tabulation of all tally sheets, Felipe Calderón, a member of Fox's conservative National Action Party (PAN), appeared to have won by a slim margin of about 244,000 votes out of some 41 million. His close rival, former Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), rallied supporters and told them that the election had been stolen and informed reporters that he would stop at nothing to claim the presidency for himself.

Mexico's current government should not abandon laws and institutional redress because of street protests. At the same time, the president-elect will need diligence and smart tactics to overcome a weak mandate and unrest drummed up by an angry rival.

Bitter Feelings

Contention was in the air before the campaign. While López Obrador or AMLO (as he is known for his initials) was the capital's mayor, Mexico's attorney general charged him with failing to obey a legal order related to construction on disputed land. Perhaps

overplaying its hand, the Fox administration asked congress to lift AMLO's immunity from prosecution, which also would have kept him from running for president. The congress complied, but, after AMLO organized a million-person street march in his defense, the government dropped charges.

López Obrador's success in that confrontation made him the early favorite in the 2006 presidential campaign. Mistakes and attack ads, however, cost him his lead. AMLO snubbed a televised debate in April; then Calderón warned AMLO would rule like Venezuela's populist autocrat, Hugo Chávez. As his ratings slid, a frustrated AMLO branded Calderón a tool of the rich and hinted that fraud would mar the contest.

After polls closed on July 2, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) said the quick count of selected voting stations was too close to call. Within minutes of IFE's announcement, AMLO declared victory—by an "irreversible" 500,000 votes. Calderón countered that he was leading. As electoral authorities continued tabulating votes, López Obrador falsely charged that three million votes were missing and that other irregularities were tilting the outcome.

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When Calderón's tally surpassed AMLO's 35.89 percent to 35.31 percent, an upset López Obrador said he would go to the federal election court for a recount of all ballots and ask the supreme court to declare the election illegal. By law, contenders are entitled to ballot recounts only from stations where tally sheets show mistakes or tampering. A full hand recount would not meet that test. Also, Mexico's high court does not try electoral disputes. Regardless of a recount, electoral authorities must decide whether the result is valid by September 6.

What To Do Now

AMLO is using the controversy he stirred to remain the center of national attention. He has told reporters that even if he loses a recount he would still press his claim to the presidency. On July 8, AMLO called an estimated 180,000 supporters to Mexico City's central square as a show of force. More marches are planned from July 12 to 16. Advising him is the former general secretary of the once-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) when it allegedly stole an election through a mysterious computer outage in 1988.

Although AMLO's case deserves a hearing, electoral authorities and the Fox administration should not cave in to street pressure to depart from the law. Moreover, Felipe Calderón must bring Mexicans together soon—by directing attention toward real solutions to deal with real problems. He can begin by adopting AMLO's main issue—poverty—as his own and educating the public on viable remedies. Blocked economic opportunity resonates: it affects 40 percent of the population and forces the unskilled and underemployed to migrate. When combined with poor education, it tunes in minds to populist appeals.

The Challenge of Governing

While Mexico's president-elect will inherit a healthy economy, it's not growing enough to supply jobs for all entering the labor force. Mexico's infrastructure is aging, the state petroleum monopoly Pemex loses money to corruption, and the country's public schools are woefully inadequate. While the North, a PAN stronghold, is relatively prosperous and resembles the United States, AMLO's South is less developed like Central America. The United

States has a burgeoning trade and security relationship with Mexico, but U.S. migration worries now pervade relations.

In his favor, Calderón has untapped legitimacy since he is the first presidential candidate to go through a primary selection process instead of naming himself or being picked by party leaders as were AMLO and the PRI's Roberto Madrazo. Furthermore, his PAN party obtained enough votes to give it a plurality, but not a majority, in both houses of congress. Time will tell if he can exploit those advantages. To strengthen other vulnerable flanks once in office, the president-elect should:

- **Be a uniter.** Lots of Mexican politicians see compromise as defeat and allow ambition to interfere with good decisions. Unwillingness to work with opponents kept the last two Mexican congresses and the Fox administration from passing needed reforms. Felipe Calderón must promote a new tradition of forming coalitions.
- **Build on success.** Thanks to President Fox, inflation has declined by two-thirds, foreign investment has increased by 74 percent, real wages have risen seven percent, fewer Mexicans live under the poverty line, and last year 577,000 new jobs were created. However, sustained reforms to establish access to affordable credit, stronger rule of law, and a decentralized, modern education system are needed to improve employment.
- **Phase-out failing institutions.** Pemex, the inefficient state petroleum company is still protected from competition and privatization. Company executives claim it loses \$1 billion annually to internal corruption. If it is national patrimony like some say, then every citizen should own stock and be able to trade it. By the same token, a fifth of Mexico's workforce toils on farms, half stuck on small, unproductive subsistence plots in a collectivized 80-year-old land-tenure system. These citizens should be free to register titles and sell or trade their land.
- **Reassess migration rhetoric.** Vicente Fox has said Mexicans have a right to work in the United States. They do not, nor do foreigners have similar rights in Mexico. Such talk excuses legislators from action on reforms to

take advantage of trade opportunities and create jobs at home.

- **Continue global outreach.** Inwardly focused for much of its history, Mexico has developed a cooperative partnership with the United States and Canada in commerce and security. Though not always agreeing with the United States, it has become an advocate of free trade and human rights in hemispheric forums, leaving behind former coziness with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. These new directions and the Fox administration's vision to spur economic development beyond Mexico's southern border should be sustained.

Conclusion

International observers and participating parties, including local PRD officials who signed polling station tallies, judged Mexico's 2006 national election as free and fair. The contest proved that votes matter. Before 2000, Mexicans used to joke that

they could go to bed on election night knowing who the next president would be regardless of who won. Now the choice rests in the people's hands. It also demonstrated the value of competition. Both leading candidates shared serious ideas: Calderón had sensible free market policies, and AMLO focused on reducing poverty. As president-elect, Felipe Calderón should blend the two.

Finally, politicians with futures know how to win and lose. As mayor of Mexico City and as a presidential candidate, López Obrador often showed contempt for institutions and procedures. Now, he is using protests to push his way into the presidency. But the more he continues this tactic, the less he looks like someone who should be president.

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