

Mexico's López Obrador shows his true colors

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OPINION

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Close elections are no big deal; they happen nearly everywhere and often. If the close July 2 vote in Mexico, my country, seems surprising and confusing, it's simply because there have been very few real elections, close or otherwise. Most scholars would agree that in the country's entire history, at most four presidential votes would qualify by international standards: those of 1911, 1994 (sort of), Vicente Fox's in 2000 and now Felipe Calderón's.

Mexico has never been very adept at transferring power regularly, peacefully and democratically; indeed, one can argue that only during the past decade has the country even begun to do so. Thus, it is quite logical that Mexico's political actors, institutions and media should be somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed in view of the result: The winner was declared by barely half a percentage point, and the loser's followers are experiencing serious difficulties in digesting what for them is a totally unexpected defeat.

Yet, despite the uncharted waters Mexico is navigating, three courses of action are clearly in order.

- **The established electoral procedures must be followed, sensibly and expeditiously** -- so that sincere doubts and questions are addressed but without having Mexico's still-precarious democracy irreparably damaged by one more instance of an aborted transfer of power. Accepting Andrés Manuel López Obrador's claim of fraudulent behavior by the nation's autonomous and trusted electoral authorities (particularly the Federal Electoral Institute, or IFE) would be a nonstarter; trying to reasonably accommodate his followers' desire for a partial and solidly grounded recount is not too much to ask.

- **Calderón has to reach out, if not to his adversaries, at least to their constituencies.** This is especially true for López Obrador's supporters from the bottom of the income scale. Most foreign observers' politically correct impression that all of the poor voted for the left and all Calderón's votes came from urban, middle-class white Catholics is inaccurate. In fact, exit polls show that 38 percent of López Obrador's voters had only elementary schooling, while 33 percent of Calderón's did; 45 percent of the leftist candidate's constituents went to middle and high school, while 43 percent of Calderón's did; and only in relation to university graduates, where Calderón obtained 21 percent of his votes, and López Obrador 16 percent, was there a statistically significant difference.

Nonetheless López Obrador did come to represent many of the aspirations of the poor, and Calderón should make some of his rival's proposals part of his government program, regardless of whether it changes anything in this protracted electoral dispute. For example, he could seek to establish a universal pension for the elderly poor, if López Obrador's party agrees to help fund it in Congress. He could seek to create a national health service that would deliver basic care to everybody, if there is funding from Congress. He could even take up López Obrador's somewhat simplistic educational program and commit himself to creating 30 universities and 200 high schools over the next three years.

None of this would change López Obrador's attitude, but it would certainly modify that of his supporters, and show that Calderón understood the election's overriding message: There are too many poor in Mexico, and something has to be done about it.

- **The United States should count its blessings. Calderón's apparent victory spared Washington a major conundrum.** I say "apparent" because, according to some, it is still in doubt. But after two full tallies, numerous exit polls and quick counts all pointing in the same direction, it seems inconceivable that Mexico's Electoral Court of Appeals would either cancel the election or overturn the IFE's decision. López

Obrador is perhaps not another Hugo Chávez. But he certainly could be taken for another Luis Echeverría, the country's president between 1970 and 1976, who was just recently indicted for crimes against humanity for the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, when he was interior minister.

And López Obrador never clarified his stance on Chávez or Cuba, for that matter: what he really thought about the way both countries were governed. He is showing his true colors by not only refusing to accept the IFE's decision -- he of course has the right to challenge it in the courts -- but also contesting it in the streets and denouncing the IFE and Fox as traitors to democracy and the architects of electoral fraud.

So Washington would do well to recall, as many have said before, that it is one thing to have Evo Morales in the Andes or Hugo Chávez along the Orinoco and quite another to have a populist on the border.

When the time comes again to take up the bilateral agenda -- immigration, border security, water management and infrastructure, working together at the United Nations and the Organization of American States, fighting organized crime in both countries -- Washington should remember its close call and give Calderón the full support it denied Fox after Sept. 11. That support would have helped Mexico, Fox and Calderón immensely.

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