

Calderon to focus on Mexico's poor

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MEXICO CITY - President-elect Felipe Calderon, a pro-business lawyer educated at Harvard, has pledged to pursue his predecessor's free-market policies. But a strong challenge from his leftist rival is forcing him to focus more of his conservative party's attention on the millions of Mexico's poor.

Calderon, 44, opposes abortion and the legalization of drugs, and has promised to wield a "firm hand" against crime, a pledge applauded by the business community

He said his policies would be centered on bettering the plight of poor families - the mantra of defeated leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

Shortly after the disputed July 2 elections concluded, Calderon - leading by less than 1 percent after an initial vote count - asked those who had supported Lopez Obrador to give him a chance to show that he, too, could provide social policies aimed at lessening poverty and increasing equality.

A lawyer who holds a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University, Calderon is a member of the conservative National Action Party, or PAN, founded in 1939 by a group of politicians including his father.

In 2000, the party, with Vicente Fox as its presidential candidate, became the first to end 71 years of single-party, authoritarian rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

He also has said he would promote private investment to build a strong economy.

Now he has modified that vision, focusing on how such private investment can generate jobs and help fight the poverty still afflicting more than 40 million of Mexico's 103 million people.

Born on Aug. 18, 1962, in the central state of Michoacan, Calderon has spent most of his life in politics. He was national youth secretary for the PAN, and secretary-general and national president of the party from 1996 to 1999.

He served as federal congressman twice, and as the PAN's leader in the lower House of Congress tried to push a series of reforms promoted by Fox that included taxing food and medicine, and allowing ample private investment in the oil sector. Fox named him energy secretary in September 2003, but he stepped down less than a year later to run for president.

Calderon had to overcome a series of obstacles on his path to the presidency, including the fact that he was not the preferred candidate of Fox, who chastised him for leaving his Cabinet post and launching what the president said was a premature campaign.

The father of three, Calderon is married to Margarita Zavala, an ex-federal congresswoman who left her seat in the lower House earlier this year to join her husband's campaign.