

Calderón's religious roots rare among Mexican presidents

The political rise of Felipe Calderón, whose life is steeped in conservative Catholicism, has raised the question of how that will affect church-state relations in Mexico.

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MORELIA, Mexico - The roots of Felipe Calderón's ascent to Mexico's presidency lie in one of the darkest periods of the country's history, when the public expression of religion was banned, Roman Catholic churches and chapels were closed and priests were forbidden to wear clerical garb or voice opinions on public affairs.

Calderón's father was among the many who took up arms in defense of the church, and it was that sense of persecution that led him in 1939 to join with other conservative Catholics to found the National Action Party, or PAN in its Spanish initials, the party whose banner Calderón appears to have carried to victory.

Calderón, 43, will be the first Mexican president whose life is steeped in the brand of conservative Catholicism that gave rise to the Cristero guerrilla movement, which fought against the anti-clerical policies of Mexico's ruling generals from 1926 to 1929.

How that will affect church-state relations in Mexico, which until the 1990s had some of the toughest laws separating church and state in the world, is unknown. Most Mexicans profess to be Catholics, but comments on public affairs by church leaders are viewed as controversial. Until 1992, priests couldn't vote and the church couldn't own property.

Calderón doesn't openly discuss his faith, and in an interview in March he said he wouldn't pursue a religious agenda. He described as "adequate" Mexico's existing abortion laws, which permit terminating a pregnancy in the case of rape, incest or risk to woman or fetus, and said he opposed any liberalization. He also opposes the "morning after" contraceptive pill.

His deeply religious background makes him unique among Mexican presidents. He was clearly marked by the struggle of his father and the PAN for religious expression.

Mexico's anti-church stance is a remnant of the bloody revolution of 1910-17, during which peasants sacked churches and killed priests because of their ties to the ruling aristocracy. The revolution itself was an extension of 19th-century efforts to rein in a church that had accumulated great power during centuries of colonial rule by Spain.

It was in 1926, when Mexico's generals imposed strict rules on religion, that Felipe Calderón's father, Luis Calderón Vega, then 15, became a Cristero, as the most strident Catholics were known.

It was a dangerous time to be religious. Many priests fled to the United States, and Calderón Vega's sister Soledad, 87, remembers that their father hid a local priest while a government spy posted on the corner watched for clergy.

Mexicans regained the right to practice religion in public in 1929, but discrimination against the church and believers continued long after. Calderón Vega entered a state university but was expelled for wearing a cross. This discrimination against devout Catholics led him to seek out like-minded conservatives, who created the PAN.

