

MEXICO

## Calderón must stand above the partisan fray

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Mexico's July 2 election is finally over. On Sept. 5, the Federal Electoral Tribunal named Felipe Calderón president-elect. A week earlier, the magistrates had ruled unfounded the charges of fraud that Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, had levied. Though judicially irrevocable, the tribunal's decisions do little to relieve the political impasse. That task falls squarely on the shoulders of Mexico's political class.

From the outset of his presidential bid, Calderón committed himself to forming a coalition government. Ongoing, discreet meetings with the opposition since July 2, which have now intensified, may make it a reality. An understanding between the National Action Party (PAN) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) is emerging. Some cracks have appeared in the wall, raised by AMLO's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) against a dialogue with a president-elect deemed "spurious." Effective governance during Calderón's six-year term will require a meaningful PAN-PRD dialogue.

Mexico is deeply polarized. Recently, Calderón applauded the victory of peace-loving Mexicans over those bent on violence. By the latter, he surely didn't mean the nearly 15 million AMLO voters, but that's what many heard. Calderón must stand above the partisan fray. At minimum, he needs to elicit a disposition to listen from these voters. Embracing the fight against poverty -- which AMLO put heart and center -- may well prompt them to lend him their ears.

Tuesday, the president-elect took the first step toward earning a bit of their trust. He asked the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) not to destroy the ballots, presumably so civil-society groups that have asked to examine them can do so. Even if not legally binding, a total recount would give the election the transparency questioned by a third of the electorate.

Calderón also has some troubles on the home front. Let's remember that President Vicente Fox and the PAN leadership preferred the candidate whom Calderón soundly defeated in the primaries, that Fox and the PAN president have yet to cede the spotlight and that the newly appointed PAN leaders in Congress are not Calderón's men. Calderón must soon send loud-and-clear signals that he is now the most important *Panista* in Mexico.

The president-elect has already distanced himself from Fox on two counts. Unlike Fox, Calderón understands Congress and knows his presidency may well hinge on his ability to work with legislators. On foreign affairs, he intends to mend fences -- to the extent possible -- with Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba, while reaching out to the rest of Latin America without slighting the all-important relationship with Washington.

The PRD is facing a classical dilemma. Will it follow AMLO and the radicals -- among whom are former PRI operatives responsible for the electoral fraud that robbed Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD founding father, of the presidency in 1988 -- into an all-consuming confrontation? Or,

will it, instead, build on the political capital gained on July 2 when the voters rendered it Mexico's second political party?

On Saturday, AMLO will preside over the so-called National Democratic Convention that could name him president-elect and pave the way for a parallel government. PRD legislators are now working on how to conduct business with their PAN and PRI colleagues in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The first path would continue the free fall in the public's esteem registered in recent polls, which rank PRD negatives on the heels of the PRI's. The second could establish the PRD as the modern, center-left party that Mexico sorely needs.

Calderón has little room for errors. Though the political class as a whole must promote conciliation and prudence, his administration bears the onus of setting the tone and the policies that move the citizenry away from the current polarization. Politics -- not a barricade mentality -- must prevail if Calderón is to be more successful than Fox. That means respecting the presidency and Congress, reaching out to his opponents and governing from the center where most Mexicans are. Some say the post-electoral conflict has dangerously weakened the incoming president. I, however, see unanticipated opportunities that Calderón could seize *por el bien de todos* -- for the good of all.

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