

# Mexico's President Rides Popularity Wave

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MEXICO CITY, [Mexico](#), March 16 — President [Felipe Calderón](#) is on a roll. You can see it in his relaxed manner these days, his ease at the lectern, whether he is meeting with President Bush or swinging through Baja, California, to unveil new projects.

“I enjoy my work as president,” he said during an interview aboard his official jet on Friday, his eyes bright behind rimless, technocrat glasses. “With all the problems and tensions, which are enormous, I am fulfilling a personal dream for which I have prepared all my life.”

He has reason to look relieved. Just a few months ago, his paper-thin victory gave him almost no mandate in the eyes of many voters, and his leftist rival, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), threatened to thwart his tenure with violent protests, arguing that the election last year had been fraudulent.

Now, recent polls show, Mr. Calderón's approval ratings are above 50 percent. He has buried Mr. López Obrador under a flurry of projects and proposals, relegating his former nemesis to the netherworld of political gadflies and malcontents deep inside the daily newspapers.

The new president cracked down on violent protests that were tearing apart the colonial city of Oaxaca. He has sent troops and federal agents into several states to combat drug cartels. He also extradited several high-level drug kingpins to the United States.

And this week he took a strong stand in meetings with President Bush, re-establishing Mexico's historic diplomatic neutrality in the region and firmly criticizing the United States for its [immigration](#) policies.

“After completing his first 100 days in office, we see he has managed in no small measure to legitimize himself through his performance, compensating for his lack of electoral legitimacy,” said José Antonio Crespo, a political analyst.

His detractors say Mr. Calderón's presidency so far has been more flash than substance. They point out, for instance, that gangland slayings continue at a strong pace despite the show of force by the military and federal police in drug-plagued states.

Rafael Segovia, a political scientist at the College of Mexico, said, "The truth is, I don't see advances. We're living through a crisis in the security system."

"It is spectacle, basically," Mr. López Obrador said recently. "A media campaign. He is a president of the media. He's president of the television, of all things to do with media. There is nothing serious."

Mr. Calderón, a conservative free-trade advocate, dismissed Mr. López Obrador's criticisms with a wave of his hand during an interview on Friday, saying there were millions of Mexicans and "every one of them has an opinion just as respectable as his." In the interview, Mr. Calderón said he believed his push to take on crime and poverty from the day of his swearing in on Dec. 1 had put to rest questions about the election.

Still, he acknowledged the biggest challenges were ahead. He has said he wants to break up Mexico's many monopolies, duopolies and cartels in various private sectors, from cement-makers to brewers.

He also wants to let private companies compete with the state electricity monopoly and persuade Congress to devote more of the profits from the state oil monopoly to exploration and drilling. Electricity rates are high and the oil monopoly, Pemex, is in trouble because the government continues to use its profits to subsidize the federal budget rather than to modernize the industry.

Mr. Calderón also seeks to overhaul the justice system. He wants to purge the local, state and federal police forces of corrupt officers, and train the forces to investigate crimes. And he would like to change the jail system so people are not detained for years before trial.

Asked about international affairs and Mexico's role in the region, Mr. Calderón walked a fine line. He refuses directly to criticize [Hugo Chávez](#), the Venezuelan populist who has been using his country's oil wealth to undermine United States hegemony. Yet he says he is worried about a trend he characterizes as "the very Latin American tendency to go back to authoritarians."

He also said he admired [Fidel Castro](#)'s leadership abilities and praised him for spearheading the Cuban revolution. But he added that he did not agree with the "conditions of political life" under the Marxist government.

Mr. Calderón says he believes Mexico can promote democracy, but he has made it clear he will do so on his terms, not as a proxy for the United States. "Mexico has to play a very active role in Latin America," he said, "a role of equilibrium, cooperation, leadership, specifically in this moment when Latin America is questioning its destiny and where it is going."

The new Mexican president is not shy about attacking the United States either. In speeches he often throws barbs at Washington, as he did Friday at the opening of a new wastewater treatment plant in the desert about 16 miles outside Mexicali. He took the opportunity to lambaste American plans to reline a canal on the other side of the border and stop the seepage of water that presently irrigates farms in Mexico.

"There is an absurd paradox in that while they work for less immigration, they are cutting off more and more opportunities for work here for Mexicans," he said to cheers.

One reason for Mr. Calderón's popularity is a widespread perception that he is more effective than his predecessor, Vicente Fox. Mr. Fox made promises he could not keep, mostly because he could not forge coalitions in Congress to enact the necessary legislation. Mr. Calderón says he delegates less authority than Mr. Fox did and tries only to announce programs he can deliver right away.

Still, like Mr. Fox, Mr. Calderón needs the approval of Congress for many of the reforms he is seeking. Both the Senate and the Chamber

of Deputies remain split among three major parties. “Calderón has nothing easy, because he also has a pretty brittle house of deputies,” said Mr. Segovia, the political scientist. He said members of Congress were famous for holding bills hostage and cutting back-room deals.

For the moment, Mr. Calderón acts like a man relishing the challenge. He beamed on a routine tour through Baja California on Friday to announce a housing development, the wastewater treatment plant and a plan to subsidize electricity during the summer. (His party faces a tough battle for the governorship in August.) He interrupted his prepared remarks to joke with the crowd. He was a far cry from the tense, buttoned-down, sober politician who last July won the election by a mere 240,000 votes.

“I know I am running risks, confronting strong forces,” he said on the presidential jet. “But I think the key to life is to live it intensely.”