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Where parties stand after the balloting

By Marifeli Pérez-Stable

Mexico's July 2 presidential election remains too close to call. On Wednesday, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) started certifying the returns from the country's 300 electoral districts. IFE had earlier acknowledged that preliminary results had excluded nearly 2.6 million ballots due to "inconsistencies." Once included, the one-point margin center-right Felipe Calderón held over center-left Andrés Manuel López Obrador -- known as AMLO -- fell to 0.6, that is, 275,537 votes out of 40 million cast.

Though Calderón's hair-thin advantage is unlikely to be overturned, AMLO still has a chance. I will, therefore, respect democracy's uncertainty and focus, instead, on the standing of Mexico's three major parties.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) fared badly. Roberto Madrazo -- a deeply flawed, divisive candidate -- came in a poor third at 22 percent and received 3.5 million votes less than the party's second-place candidate in 2000. Neither did Madrazo win a single state; in 17 (out of 31) and Mexico City, he came in third. In congressional races, the PRI registered 10 points less than in the 2003 midterm election. PRI members can take minor solace in their close third-place legislative finish, about two points behind the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Seconding electoral institute

How and if the PRI will survive is not yet clear. Still, I would not discount its rising from the ashes. Some steps in that direction have already been taken. Madrazo conceded the election and vowed to abide by IFE's official result. In the early hours of July 3, the National Action Party (PAN) and the PRD opened communication with PRI elders. The party had to choose between contesting the election (as the PRD seems inclined to do in the courts and/or on the streets) or seconding IFE (a tacit tilt toward the PAN, yes, but, more important, an emphatic stand for a strictly institutional solution to the electoral crisis). In choosing the latter, the PRI has served itself and Mexico well.

Whether or not AMLO becomes president, the PRD should act like a winner. It improved its presidential vote by a factor of 2.5: 14.5 million voters now, 5.8 million in 2000. The PRD tallied a strong second in Congress and, of course, handily retained the mayoralty of Mexico City. Yet, the PRD may not be able to capitalize on its gains, particularly if IFE officially rules for Calderón.

The PRD's performance on Election Day was largely due to AMLO, his compelling message and his powerful coat tails, not to a well-honed national party structure. To broaden his appeal beyond the PRD base, AMLO reached out to former PRI members as advisors and congressional candidates. Many PRI voters, in fact, split their ballots to favor the PRD for president.

The strategy, nonetheless, alienated staunch PRD militants for whom the PRI is worse than the barrel's bottom. Some of AMLO's closest advisors were among the perpetrators of the fraud that robbed leftist Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of his almost certain victory in the 1988 presidential election. Later, the dubiously installed PRI administration fiercely persecuted hundreds of PRD members. An AMLO loss may well explode these simmering resentments.

The PAN gained a plurality of deputies and senators. PAN members have a better than even chance of IFE ratifying their candidate. Since Sunday, Calderón has mostly been above the fray, calling for conciliation and promising an inclusive administration. His own ascendance within the PAN is itself a reaffirmation of democracy. President Vicente Fox and the party machinery backed another candidate who would have wrought a disaster at the polls; PAN primary voters wisely chose Calderón. If he becomes president, would Calderón muster more political skills to govern Mexico than Fox did?

Initially, IFE's stewardship of the election was widely lauded. Though most are not crying foul, many are beginning to wonder about its efficacy. Only after AMLO denounced the missing ballots did IFE admit their existence. Why didn't it do so from the start? Electoral authorities now need to tend to their credibility with even greater care out of respect for the 40 million Mexicans who voted on July 2. Let's hope that IFE is up to the task.