

# **A Divided Mexico Chooses Continuity: Felipe Calderón Wins by a Close Vote**

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## **Executive Summary**

On the morning of June 6, it was clear who the new president of Mexico would be: In the presidential elections, Felipe Calderón Hinojoso of the PAN, which has been in power since 2000, won 35.88 percent of the vote, defeating by a narrow margin his opponent of the PRD, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who obtained 35.31 percent. At 22.27 percent, Roberto Madrazo of the PRI, which was the 'ruling party' for decades, came in third, while the candidates of the two smaller political parties, Patricia Mercado Castro of the Partido Alternativo Socialdemócrata y Campesina and Roberto Campa Cifrián of the Partido Nueva Alianza, won no more than 2.70 and 0.96 percent of the vote, respectively.

Even before all the votes had been counted, the loser, Mr López Obrador ('AMLO'), announced that he would take legal steps against the election result, and he appealed to his supporters to gather for a protest meeting in the Zocalo in Mexico City. By now, the electoral court has taken up its work. It has time until the end of August to examine the objections in detail and to make decisions that will then be beyond appeal. Mr López Obrador lashed out in all directions: Next to the election process itself, his attacks targeted the government, the electoral court, and his rival candidate, Mr Calderón, culminating in a charge of massive and nationwide electoral fraud.

Mr Calderón's victory became apparent even after a preliminary count of the votes, when he himself obtained 36.38 percent of the vote, while the PRD's candidate won only 35.34, and when the PRI's candidate, Mr Madrazo, officially congratulated him on his victory, speaking of a 'clean, legitimate, and transparent election process'. It did not occur to Mr López Obrador to congratulate Mr Calderón. Instead, people close to his party drew a parallel with the electoral fraud of 1988, when the PRI's candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, was declared the winner over the PRD's candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, under dubious circumstances. Moreover, the PRD has begun to search for someone to blame for the defeat and to mobilise the masses because AMLO obtained a lead of one and a half million votes over Mr Calderón in Mexico City.

The electoral authority IFE also emerged from the election with a tainted reputation. It was accused of meddling in the election campaign itself by, for instance, interfering with the content of numerous TV advertisements. However, the IFE must be credited for successfully coping with 130,477 electoral districts with only eleven failures, and for realising an election that was transparent all in all.

The PAN's victory in the congressional elections was even clearer than in the presidential elections, enabling it to replace the PRI as the strongest parliamentary party in both houses for the first time. While it won 206 of 500 mandates in the house of representatives, it obtained 52 of 128 in the senate.

The outcome of the elections constitutes a disaster for the PRI which, after its 70 years of regency that lasted until 2000, now lost half its seats. In four regional elections, the defeat of the *priistas* was devastating, and even in the capital, the PRI's popular candidate, Mrs Paredes, could not prevent the victory of the PRD.

The election ended a 6-month dispute that had strongly polarised Mexico and was marred by fierce personal attacks, especially between Mr López Obrador and Mr Calderón. What was striking was that – analogously with the colours of the political parties – the country was divided into a 'blue', i.e. PAN-friendly, North and a 'yellow', i.e. PRD-friendly, South. The relatively wealthy North supported Mr Calderón's project, whereas the population of the poorer South identified itself with Mr López Obrador, who posed as advocate of the losers and of all those without a perspective. Even after the elections, the division of the country remained: Sixteen federal states went to the PAN, while fifteen federal states and the federal district went to the PRD. Denise Dresser, a political scientist, notes: 'Two candidates, two Mexicos. Two front-runners, two countries. With different objectives in mind and courses aiming for different horizons.'

When, especially in times of decreasing turnouts, some Mexicans speak of the limited legitimation of the office holder, they also criticise the country's election system which does not provide for a second ballot between the two first-placed candidates of the first election round, and rules that the winner of an election shall be determined on the basis of a simple majority.

The election campaign, whose outcome confirmed the current three-party system, constituted a classical election battle between camps from which ideological motives were by no means absent. Thus, the PAN avowed market economy and globalisation as well as the continuation of the course adopted by the previous president, Mr Fox, in economic and foreign policy. In the case of an electoral victory, those important reforms which could not be implemented during the second half of Mr Fox's presidency would be tackled first. Mr López Obrador and the PRD initially showed only a vague profile that, under the motto of 'for the good of all – the poor first', nevertheless indicated a focus on the lower classes. AMLO's initial lead in popularity induced in him an exaggerated self-confidence which resulted in tactical mistakes, such as his pointed absence from a television duel. In the 'elephant race' of the three big parties, the smaller political parties almost completely lost their profile; they merely benefited from TV debates in which, however, they could do little more than draw attention to their existence. What is worth mentioning in this context is the Mexican Greens, who this time – after diverse other manoeuvres in previous elections – sought salvation in merging their candidate lists with those of the PRI, revealing an opportunistic streak –not for the first time, either.

The sums that the Mexican political parties spent on the election campaign this time, particularly on advertisements in the media, were incredibly great. There is talk about two billion Pesos in total. 82 percent of the party's investments in the media and 71 percent of the total budget were spent on television advertisements alone, the TV giants Televisa and TV Azteca profiting most of all. This kind of media presence reached its climax in the second television duel: On June 6, the five top candidates met in Mexico City and exchanged views on five subjects. At this duel, the differences between Mr Calderón and Mr López Obrador became apparent, especially in issues such as foreign policy and the question of internal security – next to unemployment and

economic development an issue of some importance to many Mexicans. In terms of the migration question and the situation of Mexicans illegally living in the USA, the opponents showed a less clear-cut profile. The duel, which was marked by personal sparring between the two opponents, was echoed in the press the next day; the tabloid *Reforma*, for example, saw Calderón ahead of the candidate of the PRD.

The election also brought up the question of the future of the political parties, especially the PRI, which did not succeed in returning to power after its historic defeat in 2000. What is considered especially disastrous in this respect is its decision to merge lists with the Greens. What also causes concern is the fact that, although many *priistas* still hold key positions in the senate and the house of representatives, the party's governors strongly depend on finding a pragmatic way to get along with the new president – not least for financial reasons. By themselves, the ten million citizens who voted for the PRI show that there is a loyal voter potential on which the party may probably count in the future.

In the PRD which, despite its months-long lead and brilliant forecasts, ranks among the losers of the election, there will be discussions as well. Within the party, the citizens' networks are being criticised that were initially founded in parallel to the party to assist AMLO's election.

In the PAN, there are probably no signs whatsoever of soul-searching. Instead, the question is: How will the internal force fields align themselves, how strong is the new president, and how will internal cooperation work?

Mexico's political system faces a number of structural challenges, including the question of the ability to govern. One of the challenges is to introduce a second election round between the best-placed candidates if neither of them should obtain more than fifty percent of the vote in the first. Another is to question the principle which says that representatives and senators, who are largely unaccountable to their voters, should not stand for re-election. Moreover, the agenda includes those projects which the Fox government was not able to tackle –reforming the tax system and opening the energy market, amending the labour legislation and reforming federalism. Finally, the elections themselves and the finances of the parties deserve mention as well. Today, no country can afford to conduct an election campaign that lasts for more than 6 months while it freezes in a catatonic state of expectation. It seems that particularly the last question urgently calls for reform.