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At last, a victor in Mexico

After nine weeks, conservative Felipe Calderón has been declared president.

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MEXICO CITY

After two months sifting through allegations of fraud and recounting ballots in a process that echoed the US election in 2000, Tuesday Mexico's top electoral court certified conservative Felipe Calderón as the nation's new president. The decision cannot be appealed.

While the postelectoral saga has come to a close, there is no storybook ending to Mexico's closest presidential race in history.

The challenges for Mr. Calderón, a bespectacled lawyer who has been called a bookworm, remain formidable. Some say his political savvy and a shift in the congressional balance of power might make it easier to push through the energy, labor, and fiscal reforms that eluded President Vicente Fox. But his skills at negotiation and patience, as he seeks to unify a deeply divided country, will be fully tested.

Unlike Al Gore in 2000, Mexico's runner-up Andrés Manuel López Obrador (aka AMLO) has refused to concede defeat. The populist leader - who has slept in a tent with his followers in the middle of Mexico City for more than a month - has vowed to set up a "parallel" government and says that Mexico needs a "revolution."

On Friday, legislators from Mr. Obrador's Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) took the podium where President Fox was supposed to deliver his final state-of-the-nation address. He had to retreat instead, giving his speech via television later in the evening - an event that, fraught with drama, has added to the polarization of the country.

"At the end of the day Mexicans are going to have to put postelectoral politics aside and move on and start focusing on issues that have to be addressed if Mexico is going to be successful in the 21st century," says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a Mexico scholar with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "Lopez Obrador is going to have an influence, no question, and Felipe Calderón is going to have to try and not get distracted and try to stay on course."

On the campaign trail, Calderón said he would focus on jobs, promising to remain a firm US ally and maintain the free trade policies championed by Fox.

Yet, in part because of the vocal opposition of Obrador, he will also have to focus on the fact that 50 percent of Mexicans are poor, and of them, many did not benefit from Fox's friendship with the US.

The election, in which Calderón garnered 233,831 more votes than Obrador (a margin of victory of just over 0.5 percent), revealed fractures in Mexican society: the industrial north, which has benefited from NAFTA, went largely to Calderón, while Mexico City and the poorer, rural south voted for Obrador.

Calderón says he wants to entice businesses to provide more young people jobs with tax exemptions, and proposes a lower and flat rate income tax, with none for workers with low salaries. He wants to expand healthcare services and education, especially in poor and rural areas.

Such proposals could be easier to realize during this term, because of the gains the National Action Party (PAN), the party of both Calderón and Fox, made in Congress, but also because of the declines of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which fought to block Fox's proposals during the past six years.

Calderón's success "will largely depend on whether he is willing to bring in people who are outside his party," says Luis Rubio of the Center of Research for Development in Mexico City, "individuals who understand and are experienced with these kinds of challenges."

The PAN won 206 places in the 500-seat Chamber of Deputies, up from 148. The PRD won 126 seats. The PRI fell to third place with 104. Many experts say that alliances will form naturally between the PRI and the PAN.

"Both parties have pragmatic reasons to work together to counterbalance the unruly behavior of the PRD," says David Shirk, director of the Trans-border Institute at the University of San Diego. "It's actually a good thing, in terms of coalition-building, made possible by the PRI's weakness, the PAN's slight gains, and the fact that those two parties can identify a common adversary in the PRD."

Experts also expect Calderón, a former energy minister whose father was one of the founders of the PAN, to be a more savvy negotiator than his predecessor.

Yet while Fox rode into the presidency with a wave of expectation, as he ended 71 years of PRI rule, Calderón will take office Dec. 1 amid suspicion and anger from a large swath of the population who believes the election was fraudulent and unfair. And whether he has the ability to unite the country is questionable.

"Calderón is completely uncharismatic ... and has backing from a very clear sector in the economy and the nation," says Rodolfo O. De la Garza, a professor of political science at Columbia University. "It's not clear that if you need an inspirational leader he is going to provide that."

The radicalization of Obrador could work in his favor, though. He has angered thousands of Mexico City residents with his sit-in, which has snarled traffic and caused commuters to take alternative routes. A poll published in Reforma newspaper last month revealed that 30 percent of those surveyed would vote for Obrador today, while 54 percent would vote for Calderón. Some say support is waning even within his party.

"One of the major reasons López Obrador will not ultimately be able to shut down Mexico's political system is that a lot of PRD leaders and elected officials who are going into this legislative term are not going to want to make the ultimate sacrifice," says Mr. Shirk.

Calderón will face ongoing protests. On Sunday, Obrador told thousands of supporters: "We are going for deep change, root change, because that is what Mexico needs."

On Mexico's Independence Day, Sept. 16, the day Obrador has called for the national convention and the day the military usually marches down streets that are now blocked by protesters, confrontations are expected. "It would not be hard to imagine that he gets the demonstrators to stay in place. This produces a clash with military. That will have reverberations that we can't anticipate," says Mr. de la Garza.

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