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Come-from-behind winner still faces tough job in Mexico

By **Jeremy Schwartz**

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MEXICO CITY — With millions of Mexicans convinced he cheated his way to the presidency, Felipe Calderón faces perhaps the steepest odds in a lifetime of underdog battles.

The new president, scheduled to take office in December, will try to lead a deeply torn Mexico. The country is still reeling from a ferocious legal battle over the contested July 2 election that has evolved into a potentially explosive social movement led by his opponent, losing leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Calderón's challenge is huge: López Obrador refuses to recognize the election outcome and has threatened to form a parallel government. Rival legislators may attempt to physically block Calderón, a Harvard-educated conservative, from taking part in the Dec. 1 swearing-in ceremony.

He is a lifelong and devoted party man, but Calderón will have to be flexible and embrace his foes' proposals to achieve national unity, analysts say.

Calderón will be helped by a tenacity and bare-knuckle political style that belies his bespectacled, bureaucratic demeanor. Perhaps more importantly, analysts say, his years as a leader of an opposition party may give him a better understanding of what his opponents are feeling.

A team player, not a boss

Calderón has already expressed willingness to include in his Cabinet members of other parties in exchange for backing of his reform agenda. He has also integrated López Obrador's major campaign theme — combating poverty — into his plans.

"There is an element in his persona that is rigid, belligerent, vertical, almost authoritarian," said Jorge Zepeda Patterson, editor of the El Universal newspaper's weekly magazine and a man close to Calderón's inner circle. "But he has tried to work on these defects. He went to Harvard (the John F. Kennedy School of Government) in 2000 and when he came back he said he learned a lot about how to work in a team and be a leader rather than a boss."

Success will require that willingness to work with others as well as the determination that he has quietly shown through most of his career, analysts say.

At 44, Calderón is the youngest Mexican president-elect ever. He was first elected congressman at 28. Five years later, he was president of the National Action Party.

But 18 months ago, Calderón wasn't expected to win his own party's nomination.

Part of the reason for his success was that the primaries were open only to party members. And his party credentials are impeccable: The son of a PAN co-founder, Calderón has been steeped in the PAN movement since birth.

The cost of negative ads

Luis Mejia Guzman, a longtime PAN activist in Michoacan, remembers seeing him for the first time at age 5 or 6, folding political fliers for a governor's race at the family dinner table.

Mejia said Calderón's dogged determination springs from his youth spent watching the early PAN leaders. "Even after they lost they would continue fighting, until little by little they moved up the ladder," Mejia said.

Critics say Calderón belongs to the orthodox wing of the party, characterized by a strong Catholic bent and rigid conservative views on issues like abortion and family planning. He favors a flat tax and is a vocal advocate of free trade policies.

Supporters insist he is moderate and flexible.

He began the presidential journey a distant third in the polls, far behind López Obrador.

That all changed when Calderón introduced a series of TV spots in which a photo of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez morphed into a picture of López Obrador, under the title "A Danger to Mexico." The ads were later declared unfair and ordered off the air by Mexico's electoral commission, but the damage was done.

The ads helped him make it a two-man race that Calderón would eventually win by just 0.56 percent of the vote.

The negative campaign ads will likely come back to haunt him as he seeks reconciliation with López Obrador's angry supporters, who believe the ads unfairly swung the election.

"How can you negotiate with someone who you called 'a danger to Mexico?' " said Mexico City political analyst Sabino Bastida. "The negative campaign will be one of the principal problems of the reconciliation."

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