

MEXICO - Calderón: Conservative Catholic for Continuity (por Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Scarcely one year ago, no one would have dreamed that conservative-party member Felipe Calderón would end up as a presidential candidate at all, much less a favourite going into the elections this Sunday.

Calderón, of the National Action Party (PAN), which currently holds the presidency, defied predictions through a strategy founded primarily on promoting himself as the foil to his closest rival, according to the latest polls, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

With his 44th birthday coming up in August, Calderón is the youngest of the five candidates (nine years younger than López Obrador) vying to succeed President Vicente Fox.

Nevertheless, his beliefs could not differ more from the prevailing views of Mexico's younger generations. He is known to be a devout, conservative Catholic, attending daily mass, and has not shied from acknowledging his stances against abortion, condom use, homosexual relations and euthanasia.

The youngest son of Luis Calderón, who helped found PAN in the 1930s, the lawyer was just 33 when he shot to the party's leadership position in the late 1990s.

The candidate also has a masters degree in economics from the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico and a masters degree in public administration from Harvard.

In December 2005 Calderón won the PAN's internal presidential-candidate elections, an upset victory over former Interior Minister Santiago Creel, the favourite of Fox and party leaders.

The current race for the presidency has turned into a tight — and polarised — race between the candidates of the left and right, who have clearly outdistanced the remaining candidates: Roberto Madrazo (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), Patricia Mercado (Alternative) and Roberto Campa (New Alliance).

Historian Manuel Villalpando says the PAN and PRD represent the deep-seated ideological differences that have always coloured Mexico's history, and to a certain extent the widespread and intractable social inequality that persists in the country.

During his campaign, PRD rival López Obrador questioned the prevailing "neoliberal" model, referred repeatedly to the gaps between rich and poor, talked of strengthening the state, promised to implement aid measures to the least privileged and said if he won the Mexican election he would keep a low profile in international politics.

Calderón, who the left has called corrupt and a puppet of the "right and the powerful," has been almost point-for-point opposite of his rival in his policy platform. He ran as the candidate who would ensure economic stability, continuity, moderation, employment and investment, and touted an aggressive foreign policy.

When his PRD opponent pledged to lower fuel and public utility rates, such as for electricity, Calderón called him populist. Yet the conservative candidate also promised to implement similar measures, albeit for only the poorest segments of the population (who make up 40 percent of the national population of 103 million).

Several academic analysts gave the economic proposals presented by the PAN candidate passable marks, in contrast to the failing grade they assigned to the PRD candidate's platform.

Polls show that Calderón's electoral support is concentrated primarily in social sectors with higher levels of education and economic stability.

He repeatedly told voters that if López Obrador were elected president, the country could end up in an economic crisis similar to that of 1994, when the local financial system collapsed.

"I am a man of convictions who wants what is best for his children and those of all Mexicans. I will deliver a responsible and successful government," he said.

He has promised not to impose on others his well-known religious beliefs and conservative views on sex, such as his opposition to condom use and abortion.

He has invited his opponents to form a coalition government and assured there would be no hostility from his government towards them.

Although he is comfortably well off — far better than most Mexicans — the PAN candidate is not descended from any of Mexico's richest families. He enjoys playing football; his wife Margarita Zavala is a charismatic PAN legislator, and they have three children, all under the age of 10.

As a teenager, Calderón worked with Catholic groups providing social assistance in rural areas, and joined PAN as a youth leader. He rose quickly through the party ranks; when he was only 26 he was elected to the capital city's municipal Congress.

His career as a legislator continued to thrive, and he became energy minister under Fox, a position he held for barely eight months. He resigned shortly after the president publicly called him out for having declared his intentions to run as the PAN presidential candidate.

During the campaign, any differences that may have existed between Calderón and Fox apparently were smoothed over, and on various occasions the president has indirectly demonstrated his support by declaring that after the elections, Mexico must follow the path of a liberalised economy and "not populism."

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