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Felipe Calderon Takes Oath of Office in Chaotic Ceremony

by LADB Staff

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President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa began his six-year term amid controversy and by taking the oath of office in an unusual ceremony at the Congress. The new president also created an uproar by appointing two controversial figures to Cabinet posts: Francisco Ramirez Acuna as interior secretary and Eduardo Medina Mora as attorney general.

PRD, PAN clash in Congress ahead of swearing-in ceremony

Amid the tensions between legislators from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the governing conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Calderon snuck into the San Lazaro legislative building through the back door early in the morning on Dec. 1, with a heavily armed contingent, to hold a very brief swearing-in ceremony.

By entering through a back door, Calderon avoided the blockades that PRD members had set at other entrances to the San Lazaro building. The PRD delegation in the Chamber of Deputies, which contends that the PAN committed fraud to steal the election from its candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, had vowed to prevent Calderon from taking the oath of office. The PRD and its center-left coalition partners, the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), intended to block access to the podium where Calderon was to take the oath of office.

The PAN delegation preempted a PRD takeover of the podium, however, by assuming control of the area. Legislators from the two parties went so far as to camp out in the San Lazaro building for a couple of days. This led to several confrontations that included shoving matches and several fistfights. The third major party in Congress, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), attempted to play a mediating role, including proposing that the venue for the oath of office be changed. However, the PRI was unable to convince the PAN to change the location of the swearing-in ceremony.

Oath of Office ceremony lasts only four minutes

The tense climate forced the PAN to sharply curtail the ceremony, which lasted only four minutes and included a rushed rendition of Mexico's national anthem. Even so, chaos reigned during the ceremony, with PRD, PT, and PCD deputies blowing whistles and shouting at Calderon to leave the premises.

At the same time, PAN deputies cheered and chanted slogans. In an earlier televised ceremony at Los Pinos presidential residence shortly after midnight, outgoing President Vicente Fox handed the presidential sash to Calderon in a similarly rushed and awkward ceremony that lasted a mere 15 minutes.

Officials billed the passing of the sash as "a symbolic act," with the official act to occur later in the Congress. Some political observers said the manner in which the oath of office was administered

sent a confusing message to Mexican citizens. "If this is his first act as president, and he does it at midnight and in the dark, it's a very bad start," said analyst Marcela Bobadilla of the Instituto Mexicano de Estudios Politicos (IMEP). "It would mean he's ceding to threats and blackmail." The new president must walk a fine line between leading a more assertive administration and adopting a hard line against dissent, some analysts said. "Calderon can't give in to pressure like Fox did or he'll send signals of weakness that he can't afford," said Jose Antonio Crespo, an analyst at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "If he adopts a very hard, rigid line, he could lose control of the country."

Unlike his predecessor, Calderon is expected to have a less confrontational style with the opposition and to seek compromises. "He is accustomed to negotiating. He is a person who places importance on the Congress," said Soledad Loaeza, a professor of political science at the Colegio de Mexico. "He is strong-willed and persistent and disciplined. He is a fighter." Still, the narrow margin of victory in the presidential election and the continuing strong support for Lopez Obrador will make Calderon's political challenges much greater than those faced by Fox. "Calderon cannot underestimate Lopez Obrador, who will likely dog the president throughout his six years in office," said CIDE political analyst Francisco Javier Aparicio.

Lopez Obrador leads protest on inauguration day

Lopez Obrador, who claims to be Mexico's "legitimate" president, held his own swearing-in ceremony in Mexico's City's central square, the Zocalo, on Nov. 20. To symbolize his claim, he also donned a replica of the sash worn by Mexican presidents. On Dec. 1, the day of Calderon's inauguration, Lopez Obrador led tens of thousands of supporters in a march to the national auditorium (Auditorio Nacional), where Calderon was to give a speech in the afternoon. "They violated the Constitution and trampled on Mexicans' dignity. They imposed him [Calderon] through a coup, and we are living with the consequences," Lopez Obrador told supporters at the start of the march, which began in the Zocalo.

Beyond the political problems, Calderon will face many difficult challenges, especially the growing clamor in Mexico for the government to address poverty and create jobs. This could be accomplished in part by increasing expenditures on key social programs. The increased funding, however, would necessitate an overhaul of the tax system. The new president has already proposed a plan to close tax loopholes and increase corporate taxes. Depending on the extent of these measures, this could put him in conflict with some members of the business sector.

Other potential pitfalls for the new president include dealing with drug-related violence, which appears to be spiraling out of control (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26). "There have been 2,000 deaths this year in a drug war and because of that there are parts of the country that you can't even enter," said political consultant Daniel Lund, who is also director of the Mexico City-based polling company MUND Americas.

Calderon divides cabinet into four areas

Just days before the inauguration, Calderon announced his Cabinet choices, grouping his ministers into four areas: economic policy, social policy, public safety, and political affairs. Economic Policy Finance (SHCP): Agustin Carstens

Economy (SE): Eduardo Sojo
Energy (SENER): Geogina Kessel
Communications and Transportation (SCT): Luis Tellez
Tourism (SECTUR): Rodolfo Elizondo
Social Policy Social Development (SEDESOL): Beatriz Zavala
Health (SSA): Jose Angel Cordoba
Public Education (SEP): Josefina Vazquez Mota
Agriculture (SAGARPA): Alberto Cardenas
Agrarian Reform (SRA): Abelardo Escobar
Environment (SEMARNAT): Juan Rafael Elvira
Public Safety Attorney General (PGR): Eduardo Medina Mora
Public Safety (SSP): Genaro Garcia Luna
National Defense (SEDENA): Guillermo Galvan
Navy: Mariano Francisco Saynez Mendoza
Political Affairs Interior (SEGOB): Francisco Ramirez Acuna
Comptroller General (SFP): German Martinez Cazares
Foreign Relations (SRE): Patricia Espinosa

Calderon also restored the office of the presidency, which had been eliminated during the Fox administration. The director of that office, the president's close collaborator Juan Camilo Mourino, will serve in a role similar to a chief of staff.

As expected, the economic-policy cabinet drew criticisms from the PRD, which said the choices represented a continuation of the neoliberal policies that have widened the gap between the rich and poor in Mexico during the past two decades. Leading the economic cabinet is finance secretary nominee Agustin Carstens, who left a high-level position with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lead Calderon's economic-policy team (see SourceMex, 2006-10-25).

Another important official in the economic-policy cabinet is Eduardo Sojo, named to the post of economy secretary. Sojo, who served as Fox's chief economic adviser, drew some criticisms because of his connections to the previous administration. Calderon also decided to group SECTUR in the economic cabinet, signaling his intention to place a high priority on the tourism sector (see SourceMex, 2006-11-29).

Interior secretary, attorney-general nominees controversial

The protests about the nominees on the economic team were muted in comparison to the uproar about Calderon's choices of Medina Mora for attorney general and Ramirez Acuna for interior secretary, two posts included in the public-safety cabinet. The PRD strongly objected to Ramirez Acuna, the outgoing governor of Jalisco state, for supporting the local police as they mistreated protestors at a summit of Latin American and European officials in Guadalajara in 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-04-16 and 2006-11-15).

The interior secretary is considered the second-most-powerful post in the administration, and critics contend the appointment of Ramirez to head the secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion) is a sign that Calderon will be taking a hard line against dissent.

If ratified, Ramirez will be in charge of the still-unresolved conflict in Oaxaca, which started as a strike by the local chapter of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) but escalated into a wider social conflict (see SourceMex, 2006-08-02, 2006-09-13, and 2006-11-01).

"[Ramirez] is going to continue with an authoritarian policy and will seek to criminalize any groups that engage in protests," said Jorge Alonso Sanchez of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropologia Social (CIESAS). The PRI has also criticized Ramirez Acuna for using his power as governor to illegally help candidates of his party during the 2006 gubernatorial, congressional, and mayoral elections. The PAN defeated the PRI handily in those elections (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12).

The response of the Fox administration to the Oaxaca situation has also given critics grounds to oppose the designation of Medina Mora to head the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR). Medina, who served as public-safety secretary under Fox, was responsible for the decision in early November to send federal law-enforcement personnel to Oaxaca City to retake control of some areas that had been taken over by protestors (see SourceMex, 2006-11-19).

Despite the concerns, Ramirez and Medina Mora are expected to gain easy ratification because the PAN holds a plurality in Congress. The PAN is likely to gain support from the PRI, as its concerns about Ramirez Acuna are not deemed sufficient to derail his nomination.

Two women appointed to important posts

Calderon's other choices were not as controversial, but critics contend that the new president should have named a more politically inclusive Cabinet rather than surrounding himself with PAN collaborators, such as Alberto Cardenas, German Martinez, Josefina Vazquez Mota, and Beatriz Zavala, and supporters from the PRI like Luis Tellez.

Some analysts speculated that Calderon did try to reach out to some members of center-left parties, but was rebuffed. "There are no opposition figures, and part of the reason is that the opposition has refused to accept any offer," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. Conversely, Calderon appointed women to two of the more important Cabinet posts. Patricia Espinosa Castellano will lead

the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), and economics professor Georgina Martinez Kessel will head the Secretaria de Energia (SENER).

Ex-foreign relations secretary Rosario Green, who served in the last two years of former President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, lauded the nominee for foreign relations secretary. "The appointment of Espinosa is an excellent move," said Green, who noted the secretary-designate's ample diplomatic experience. Arturo Sarukhan, who had been widely expected to receive the SRE post, will instead coordinate the Calderon administration's relations with the US, including immigration policy.

Kessel's appointment was more of a surprise, given her limited experience in the energy sector. Some analysts view her nomination as a sign that Calderon will not make a major push for energy reforms, given the strong opposition from the PRD to any moves to further privatize the state-run oil and electrical companies. "It's going to be extremely difficult and therefore quite unlikely that he get serious energy reform through," Pamela Starr, Latin America analyst for the Washington-based Eurasia Group, told the Los Angeles Times. "This is recognition of that reality."

Perhaps as a counterpoint to Kessel's limited experience in the energy sector, Calderon appointed veteran Jesus Reyes Heroles to head the state-run oil company PEMEX. Reyes Heroles, who has long been affiliated with the PRI, served as energy secretary in 2003-2004. (Sources: Notimex, 11/22/06, 11/24/06, 11/28/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 11/22/06, 11/25/06, 11/28/06, 11/29/06; Spanish news service EFE, 11/24/06, 11/30/06; The Chicago Tribune, 11/30/06; The Houston Chronicle, 11/21/06, 12/01/06; Associated Press, 11/21/06, 11/24/06, 11/27-30/06, 12/01/06; Los Angeles Times, 11/22/06, 12/01/06; El Universal, 11/24/06, 11/27-30/06, 12/01/06; The Dallas Morning News, 11/25/06, 11/29/06, 11/30/06, 12/01/06; Bloomberg news service, 11/28/06, 12/01/06; Reuters, 11/28-30/06, 12/01/06; Copley News Service, 11/30/06, 12/01/06; McClatchy Newspapers, The New York Times, 12/01/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 11/29/06, 12/04/06; El Financiero, 11/29/06, 11/30/06, 12/01/06, 12/04/06; La Jornada, 11/22/06, 11/25/06, 11/28-30/06, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; Reforma, 11/23/06, 11/24/06, 11/28-30/06, 12/04/06, 12/05/06; El Economista, 11/23/06, 11/24/06, 11/27-30/06, 12/01/06, 12/04/06, 12/05/06; Milenio Diario, 11/28-30/06, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; Excelsior, 11/29/06, 11/30/06, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 11/29/06, 12/06/06)

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