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## **President Felipe Calderon Proposes Ambitious Electoral And Political Reforms**

*by LADB Staff*

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Mexico is about to undergo a major transformation in the structure of its political and electoral system, with the executive and legislative both acknowledging that changes are needed. President Felipe Calderon has proposed a 10-point plan that promotes a runoff election, independent candidacies, a reduction in the size of the Congress, re-election for mayors and federal legislators, and the creation of a system for referendums and plebiscites.

The Congress is in general agreement with those proposals, although there are differences on how deep the changes need to be. Some legislators favor caution when considering electoral reforms, but most others want the changes to go deeper than those proposed by the president. Calderon's plan for changing country's electoral and political system, which he submitted in mid-December, is the first major effort to revamp a system that many believe has been highly undemocratic and designed to reward the political elite.

The Congress generally endorsed the move toward reform but said the plan required further study and suggested that some points could be deepened or modified. Significantly, one of the president's proposals endorses a runoff election in any presidential race where the winner does not obtain an absolute majority, at least 50% plus one votes. Calderon won the 2006 election with just under 36% of the vote, less than one percentage point above that received by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who was representing a center-left coalition (SourceMex, July 12, 2006)

The president's plan would also permit independent candidacies for any office. Such candidacies are currently prohibited under Mexico's electoral codes.

### ***Plan would reduce size of Chamber of Deputies, Senate***

Another far-reaching measure in Calderon's plan is a move to reduce the size of the Mexican Congress by cutting the number of at-large seats that are allocated based on the percentage of the vote received by each party.

Under the proposal, the Chamber of Deputies would be reduced from 500 to 400 seats. This means that there would only be 100 at-large seats, since there are 300 electoral districts in Mexico.

There would be similar changes in the Senate, where the number of seats would be reduced from 128 to 96, with the number of at-large seats dropping to 32. Some legislators want to eliminate the at-large seats altogether because this would make the Congress more accountable to the people than to the political parties. "This is something that the Mexican people have been requesting," said Deputy Francisco Ramirez Acuna, a member of Calderon's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

Other observers concur that at-large legislators, who are frequently members of the party elites, have tended to set the agenda for Congress. "The opinion of the parties and not the input of the public is what guides the Chamber of Deputies," wrote Rodrigo Labardini Flores, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Cronica de Hoy*.

But Labardini stopped short of endorsing the total elimination of at-large seats, since this gives some smaller parties, which usually do not win directly elected seats in Congress, a voice in the legislative process.

Still, it is likely that the number of small parties would be greatly reduced because Calderon's plan would raise the percentage of the vote required for a party to obtain registration and federal financing to 4% from the current 2%.

### *Legislators would be allowed to seek re-election*

As a companion measure to reducing the size of Congress, Calderon has proposed that members of both houses be allowed to stand for re-election, but term limits would apply.

Under the current system, deputies serve for a single three-year term. Calderon's plan would allow deputies to run for re-election three times, serving for as many as 12 years. Senators, who now serve a single six-year term, would be allowed to run once for re-election, matching the maximum number of years of service for members of the Chamber of Deputies. Calderon said the plan would give voters more input in deciding whether legislators were doing their job.

"Citizens should be the ones who reward a good performance and who punish an irresponsible or careless use of power. The idea is to give more power to the citizens, to enhance their ability to determine the course of public life and thus strengthen our democracy," Calderon said on Dec. 15 when he first presented the proposal. Some observers said this plan would let the Congress establish better lines of communication with citizens and create a more stable parliamentary group in Congress.

"The voter would not only reward or punish the party for its performance but also specific individuals," Lorenzo Cordova Vianello, a political researcher at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. The president's plan proposes similar guidelines for mayors, who could stand for re-election three times for a total of four terms or 12 years. Most mayors in Mexico serve a single three-year term, including the chief executives in large cities like Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Puebla.

The only exception is in Mexico City, where the mayor is considered on par with the country's 31 governors and serves a single six-year term.

"The idea to permit re-election of mayors also makes sense," said Cordova Vianello. "Their terms are very short, and many municipal projects require medium- and long-term planning." Calderon's proposal for re-election did not include state legislatures, but it did mention the possibility of letting state legislative bodies determine whether re-election is viable.

Legislatures in Michoacan and other states have already begun discussions on plans to implement a re-election system.

#### Proposal for referendums, plebiscites strongly endorsed

Another of the president's proposals that received strong support was for citizens to participate in referendums and even to submit initiatives for citizens to consider. "The measures dealing with plebiscites and referendums are worthy of consideration," said Marco Antonio Banos, one of the counselors at the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE).

This proposal also received a strong endorsement from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which has pushed for greater democratization of Mexico's government structures. "We have proposed these measures before, and we believe that it's very positive that the executive is endorsing them," said PRD president Jesus Ortega.

Other minor proposals are in Calderon's plan, including one to allow the high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) to propose legislative measures related to its day-to-day functions. Another would let the president designate "priority" issues on the congressional agenda during the crucial legislative period between October and December.

A third measure would permit the executive to make observations on legislation approved by Congress. Despite general support in Congress for electoral and political reforms, the Congress appears in no hurry to approve an initiative.

Some legislators said the plan requires ample discussion and perhaps some modifications. Sen. Ramiro Hernandez Garcia, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), cited the need for a mechanism to remove an elected official in the case of malfeasance in office or violations of the Constitution. He also proposed legislation allowing the Congress to ratify the president's key Cabinet appointments.

PAN Sen. Santiago Creel, who especially endorsed the proposals for a runoff election and independent candidacies, told reporters he expected the Senate to begin discussions on electoral and political reforms sometime in February. "If we don't carry out reforms, we won't be able to overcome paralysis and gridlock," said Creel, who served as interior secretary during the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox.

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