

Critics: Dirty Tricks Taint Mexico Vote

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MEXICO CITY -- Felicia Gonzalez says she was undecided in the last presidential election until campaign workers knocked on her door and offered her nearly \$200 in cash and a basket full of rice, beans, cooking oil and sugar. That was more than the 35-year-old cleaning woman makes in a month, so suddenly her choice was easy.

"I thought, why not? Who else was going to come along and offer me that much money?" she said.

That's the sort of campaign fraud election officials pledged to eradicate from Mexico's long-corrupt political system. While they have made progress, many say foul play still taints the system weeks before the July 2 presidential election.

Mexico's special prosecutor for electoral crimes, Maria de los Angeles Fromow, said her office has received at least 250 complaints, including the alleged diversion of government funds to campaigns.

President Vicente Fox himself has been widely criticized for intervening in the campaign.

Fox has repeatedly issued thinly veiled criticisms of leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and ran a taxpayer-funded advertising blitz promoting his administration.

"What Fox is doing may not be illegal, but it certainly is immoral," said Sergio Aguayo, a political analyst at the elite Colegio de Mexico.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, ran Mexico for 71 years. In its first half-century, it made little pretense at allowing serious competition, despite sometimes bloody clashes over allegedly stolen national, state and local elections.

Pressure for reform intensified in 1988, when the PRI was accused of stealing the presidency. Computerized vote results stalled early on with an opposition candidate ahead. When the system came back up, the PRI was shown winning again.

Laws since then have removed government control over elections, creating an autonomous election agency and an electoral court to rule on disputes. A special prosecutor's office under the attorney general investigates election-related crimes.

Those reforms made Mexico's elections democratic enough by 2000 that voters could oust the PRI, electing Fox as president.

Fox took things further, winning passage of a freedom-of-information law and allowing unprecedented freedom for the country's news media.

But change has been uneven. Gonzalez, the cleaning woman, said members of Fox's National Action Party bought her vote in 2000. The party also was fined for illegally accepting campaign money from foreigners that year and for violating campaign-spending limits.

The PRI was fined for funneling money from the labor union of Mexico's state-run oil monopoly to its presidential candidate in 2000.

Even before this year's campaign, several members of Lopez Obrador's party were caught on video taking suitcases full of cash. They denied taking bribes, arguing the gifts were campaign contributions. Critics alleged the gifts were not reported.

This year, rivals have accused Lopez Obrador's party of using public money to lure votes in Mexico City, where he was mayor. Some members of Fox's party have been accused of conditioning federal aid on political support.

The independent Mexican watchdog group Alianza Civica says as many as 4 million people receive benefits from governments led by the three main parties and could be pressured this year. Alianza's executive secretary, Silvia Alonso Felix, said that "could make the difference in the results" of a tight election.

As in the last election, the National Action Party's rivals have accused Roman Catholic priests of backing party candidate Felipe Calderon, violating laws that bar the clergy from interfering in elections.

Some companies also have been pressuring workers to vote for a favored party, according to Dan Lund, president of the Mexican polling firm Mund Americas.

The president of the Coppel furniture and clothing chain, Enrique Coppel, wrote a letter to his 30,000 employees detailing reasons why they should vote for Calderon _ though he also told workers they were free to vote for any candidate.

The Federal Electoral Institute has urged businesses to refrain from publicly backing candidates or offering extra benefits to employees who vote.

There are indications that voters are starting to resist outside pressures. Lund said a study of the 2000 elections showed many people took favors from the PRI and expressed their support for the party _ then went on to vote for Fox.