

Conservative Has Slight Edge in Mexico Vote

THE NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 4, 2006

MEXICO CITY, July 3 — [Mexico's](#) two leading candidates positioned themselves on Monday for a fight after electoral authorities said Sunday's presidential election was so close it would take at least two days to carefully sift the returns.

Unofficial results from more than 98 percent of all polling places showed Felipe Calderón, the fiscal conservative backed by big business, with a lead of one percentage point over Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the fiery leftist whose campaign championed the country's poor.

Several political and financial analysts said they believed that Mr. Calderón's 384,000-vote lead, narrow as it was, was unlikely to be reversed, with only about 800,000 more votes to be tallied, but Mr. López Obrador said that the preliminary tally was flawed and that he planned to challenge it in court.

In the meantime, the way the candidates manage themselves and their supporters will determine whether the stalemate strengthens or weakens Mexico's young democracy.

After a tumultuous night in which both candidates claimed victory and held rowdy celebrations, conflicting feelings of concern rippled across a nation that is averse to political violence and that has lived through decades of electoral fraud.

Some Calderón supporters feared that Mr. López Obrador would refuse to accept final results if they showed he had lost and would incite unrest. On the other side, some leftists worried the government would try to rob Mr. López Obrador of the presidency. Mr. Calderón belongs to the National Action Party of President Vicente Fox, and was the sitting president's choice to succeed him.

Both candidates fed those worries in television appearances on Monday. Mr. López Obrador urged his supporters to "have patience,"

and said he would "act responsibly." But he also said he would accept defeat only if his own review of results showed he had lost. He did not rule out calling his supporters for mass marches or civil disobedience.

"If we lost the election, I will recognize it," he said. "But if I won, even by one vote, I am going to defend that triumph."

Mr. Calderón, appearing on national television a short while later, declared that the preliminary results showed clearly that he had won and that a few more days of counting would not change that. He called on his opponent to admit defeat and "begin a time of reconciliation and unity among Mexicans."

"I can assure all Mexicans that I won the elections, and I have the papers in hand," he said, brandishing the preliminary results.

"It's time to recognize the result," he added. "It's not my triumph. It's the triumph of the people who voted."

Election officials said they would not have official results until Wednesday at the earliest, when local electoral boards in 300 districts will scrutinize and recount the official tallies from each of 130,000 polling places. Those results will be passed on to state-level election officials, then sent to Federal Electoral Institute headquarters, which in turn will certify them and hand them over to a special electoral court on Sunday for approval.

If one of the candidates contests the results, the legal wrangling over votes could lead to a recount in some districts or the annulment of some votes. Challenges could take weeks, even months. By law, the court must declare a winner by Sept. 6.

Gaston Azcarraga, the president of an influential group of the country's top business leaders, predicted that Mexico was up to the challenge the uncertainty presented and expressed confidence in the election commission to credibly resolve the contest. He dismissed the competing claims of victory by the two candidates as "human nature" and argued that Mexico was far from crisis.

"This was an incredibly competitive election," said Mr. Azcarraga, head of Grupo Posadas, Latin America's largest hotel company. "But we can count on a very solid institution in the IFE," as the election commission is known.

"Whoever wins," he said, "we Mexicans are all in this boat together. We have to agree to row together."

As has been the case throughout the race, public attention is focused on Mr. López Obrador, who lost a race in 1994, for governor of Tabasco State, in an election marred by complaints of vote-buying and fraud.

Political analysts like Robert Pastor of American University said the history of the Democratic Revolutionary Party of Mr. López Obrador and his own scrappy political instincts could easily lead him to take this fight to the streets.

Others, like Pamela Starr, a Latin America expert for the Eurasia Group, a consultancy, said she suspected that Mr. López Obrador had learned from the election that his confrontational political style frightened away supporters in a country where people are overwhelmingly poor, but hold conservative, middle-class sensibilities.

Ms. Starr said she expected Mr. López Obrador to "make a lot of noise" but to concede defeat quickly. "But there is a big caveat here," she said. "I think López Obrador will accept defeat. But the radical wing of his party may not."

The Democratic Revolutionary Party, or P.R.D., has come close to the presidency once before. In 1988, its candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, lost the presidency to [Carlos Salinas de Gortari](#) of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

In that race, the computers whose tallies showed Mr. Cárdenas with a comfortable lead over Mr. Salinas mysteriously blacked out, and when they came back on line they showed Mr. Salinas in the lead.

Rather than contest the results, Mr. Cárdenas conceded to his opponent. Dan Lund, a pollster who does work for the P.R.D., said hard feelings still hang over the party.

Mr. López Obrador has made clear that he feels personally persecuted by the political establishment, with some cause. Last year, he orchestrated huge protests after his opponents in the National Action Party and the PRI tried to knock him off the ballot with a legal challenge over a minor land dispute.

"This society has a huge postponed poverty agenda, and López Obrador speaks for these people," Mr. Lund said. "If he backs down without defending their votes, he runs the risk of pushing those people out of the electoral arena into other options that are not good for anyone."

Late in the afternoon, Mr. López Obrador denounced the preliminary results, saying they could not be trusted, and showed copies of reports from polling places that did not conform to the results announced by federal election officials. He also asserted that three million votes were missing and had not been counted.

"We are going to take this to the corresponding legal authorities," he was quoted by Reuters as saying.

Mr. Calderón's strategy seemed to be to declare victory and force Mr. López Obrador into the uncomfortable position of having to challenge the results. If Mr. López Obrador calls for marches to protest the election results, he confirms Mr. Calderón's accusation that he is a rabble-rouser who does not respect democratic institutions.

"I don't really see in millions of Mexicans a desire to take the streets, when they already took to the polls as a democratic option," said Josefina Vázquez Mota, a close campaign adviser to Mr. Calderón.

Meanwhile, Roberto Madrazo, the PRI candidate, did not win in a single state, garnering 21 percent of the vote, according to the unofficial returns. Mr. Madrazo's performance marked a new low for the party that once ruled Mexico with only token opposition until Mr. Fox's historic victory in 2000.

Large numbers of voters who live in states long considered strongholds of the PRI, including Mexico State, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Puebla and Tabasco, abandoned Mr. Madrazo, who was widely perceived as dishonest.