

Vote-by-Vote Recount Is Demanded in Mexico

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MEXICO CITY, July 4 — The Mexican electoral crisis deepened Tuesday, as the leftist candidate demanded a vote-by-vote recount and election officials acknowledged that up to three million votes had not been tallied in the preliminary results.

The ballots counted so far showed the conservative, Felipe Calderón, with the narrowest of leads, fewer than 400,000 votes, over his leftist opponent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Mr. López Obrador's challenge made it clear that this country was about to live through its own version of the drawn-out legal battle that Americans experienced in the 2000 presidential race. [Mexico's](#) dispute, however, instead of being focused on one state, could be nationwide.

On the day before the Federal Electoral Institute, or I.F.E., begins its final official tabulation of an estimated 43 million ballots, questions were raised about the uncounted votes, missing tally sheets, nullified votes and ballots left blank that were registered in the preliminary count.

Some supporters of Mr. López Obrador, the populist former mayor of Mexico City, began to grumble about the possibility of fraud and manipulation of the counting system, an inevitable response in a country with a long history of fraudulent elections.

A few dozen protesters gathered on a major street just south of Central Plaza here, the Zócalo, wearing López Obrador T-shirts. "The election has been robbed!" they shouted. "We will fight!"

Foreign election observers said the election was transparent and largely free of problems, adding that the system could even be a model for many other countries.

The president of the electoral institute, Luis Carlos Ugalde, stunned many voters on Tuesday morning when he acknowledged in a

television interview that the preliminary count could not be used to call the race and that slightly more than three million votes remained to be counted.

He made clear that although many votes could be recounted, it was unlikely that all ballot boxes would be reopened. Mr. Ugalde said those ballots were not tallied because they were illegible or did not reach his offices in time. "It is a matter of human error," Mr. Ugalde said, "not fraud."

In a news conference on Tuesday, Interior Minister Carlos Abascal played down the possibilities for a ballot-by-ballot recount, saying recounting every ballot was "physically impossible and also legally impossible."

Electoral officials said the law allowed ballot boxes to be opened only if there were evidence of tampering or if the tally sheets were illegible or had mistakes in calculations.

Mr. López Obrador and members of his Democratic Revolutionary Party say they do not believe that there was rampant fraud. But they added that they believed that there were enough errors and irregularities to throw the election their way.

At a tense news conference on Tuesday, party leaders said the vote for Mr. López Obrador was inaccurately reported at some polling places and that some polling places reported Mr. Calderón's vote twice.

Senator Jesús Ortega, Mr. López Obrador's campaign manager, demanded that the electoral authorities open all the sealed ballot boxes. "I say for the health of the republic it would be good to recount vote by vote," Mr. Ortega said.

While Mr. López Obrador remained secluded in his apartment, his aides said their surveys of voters leaving polling places showed that he had won, and they predicted that the recount would give him a victory.

"We are not in a power play here," said Manuel Camacho Solís, a former mayor of Mexico City who helped run the campaign. "But we are defending our rights."

Mr. Calderón's aides continued to say the official count later this week would give him the victory.

"In this election, Calderón had the advantage and that will be ratified once the count of all the election boards is finished," said Germán Martínez, the National Action Party representative at the electoral institute.

The count scheduled to begin Wednesday is not new here. The system has been in place since 1994. But it was considered little more than a formality because the last two presidential races were decided by such wide margins that the winners were announced shortly after the polls closed.

With a race this tight, the final count is the only one that matters. Sealed ballot boxes have been sent from 130,000 polling places to 300 district offices. On Wednesday, the boxes will be opened and the tally sheets will be read aloud before representatives of all parties and any interested citizens.

If all the parties agree with the results on the tally sheets, the results will be entered into the computerized database of the electoral system, and the ballot box will be stored.

If a party contests the tally, the authorities will recount a box of ballots one by one. If a disagreement persists, a party has four days to file a complaint at the electoral tribunal.

"The bottom line is it is very difficult to imagine fraud taking place, given the number of safeguards built into the system," said Chris Sabatini, senior director of policy at the Americas Society-Council of the Americas, which has electoral observers here. "Right now, the process is working. López Obrador has presented his complaints, and because the system is so transparent, those complaints can be resolved as the process continues."

The process will be the focus of intense scrutiny by party leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Outside the offices of the election commission, protesters have begun to gather to demand fairness. Some carried ballots marked for Mr. López Obrador that they said they had found in

dumpsters in Milpa Alta. Others carried homemade posters, beseeching the election commission, "I.F.E. do not rob our hope."

"If they count the votes fairly and we lost the election, we will recognize that," said Sara Matamoros, 34. "But we want them to count the votes. We voted for change. We have had enough of the same."

In explaining the uncounted votes, Mr. Ugalde, the chairman of the election agency, said an estimated 600,000 ballots might not have reached his offices to be included in the preliminary count.

As many as 13,000 tally sheets, covering 2.6 million votes, were set aside for the final count because the poll reports were illegible or had other inconsistencies, he added.

Another official at the commission said an estimated that 800,000 nullified votes were likely to be scrutinized carefully in the final count.

Mr. Ugalde said that although the electoral system was light-years ahead of where it was 10 years ago, it continues to rely on materials like paper ballots and crayons.

In an effort to open the system to more scrutiny, the system uses ordinary citizens to tally votes and report them on handwritten forms to the election commission.

"The most important thing is that this election has not been decided by the PREP," Mr. Ugalde said, using the Spanish shorthand for the preliminary count. "The election was decided on Sunday, and the official counting of those ballots will start tomorrow."