

Tensions Grow Over Mexico Vote as opposition plans rally saturday

THE NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 8, 2006

MEXICO CITY, July 7 — [Mexico](#) hung in limbo on Friday, as tensions rose between those seeking a recount in the presidential race and those seeking to accept [Felipe Calderón](#) as the winner and move on.

After a tally showed that the two top candidates were separated by 243,000 votes, the election has exposed deep divides in society, along class and regional lines. The voting has put the strength of the young democracy to its toughest test.

A day after election officials said Mr. Calderón, an advocate of free trade, had won the narrowest of victories, the country seemed more on edge than on a high.

Supporters of Mr. Calderón's leftist rival, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), girded for fights in court and on the streets, beginning with a rally scheduled for Saturday. Mr. Calderón's supporters and allies called on Mr. López Obrador to concede defeat for the good of the country.

The uncertainty caused consternation among citizens of all political persuasions.

"This man López Obrador makes people afraid, and his worst fault is that he lies to people and can stir up violence," said Sandra Sánchez, 38, a designer who voted for Mr. Calderón. "He should recognize his defeat already, because if he says he defends the people, he should know the people don't want to fight."

Consuelo Castillo Guerrero, 63, an impeccably dressed retired saleswoman, plans to march in support of Mr. López Obrador. "We want absolute transparency, because we're not convinced," Ms. Castillo said. "I think that if things were as clean as they say, then what's the inconvenience of recounting?"

The White House was quick to support Mr. Calderón. President Bush called to congratulate him in the early afternoon for receiving the largest number of votes, even though he had not officially been declared president-elect. Mexican law requires the electoral court to ratify the results.

"The president also noted the solid foundation of the U.S.-Mexican relationship and his confidence in Mexican democratic institutions," said Frederick Jones, a spokesman for the [National Security Council](#).

The [European Union](#) said Friday that there was no evidence of major fraud or irregularity in the election, Reuters reported. Election observers, who visited a third of the country's 300 electoral districts during voting last Sunday, "did not report incidents or irregularities that could cloud the transparency of the counting process or affect the results," said Ignacio Salafranca, head of the European Union team.

Mr. Calderón took the role of president-elect on Friday in a meeting with foreign correspondents. He discussed plans to improve relations with the rest of Latin America, to strengthen the commitment to human rights and to making the country a magnet for investment to help generate jobs and keep Mexicans from migrating to the United States.

When asked about the polarization that threatens to undermine confidence in his government, Mr. Calderón, 43, said he would work to rebuild relations among his rivals in Mr. López Obrador's Democratic Revolutionary Party. Mr. Calderón also made clear that he was prepared to use his National Action Party's new plurality in Congress to sway support from other parties and govern without Mr. López Obrador's party if it tries to block him.

Mr. Calderón said he was not worried about a legal challenge to the election because most evidence indicated that he had won the most transparent presidential election in Mexican history. He said the irregularities found in the first count were minor. And he made clear that he would not support a new count.

"This is a plural country," he said. "And everyone's first responsibility, especially mine, is reconciliation." Mr. Calderón said he received a

congratulatory call on Sunday from President Vicente Fox, who has withheld public comment on the election. Congratulations came from governments that included Canada and Spain, as well as the United States.

The Mexican stock market seesawed all week as the news changed. By the end of the week, it had gained 3.6 percent. Wall Street analysts agreed that Mr. Calderón's victory seemed unassailable, but warned investors to settle in for a long wait until the election was confirmed.

The United States ambassador here, Antonio O. Garza, wrote that although the electoral process was not complete, "I believe the actions of Mexico's current administration and the political parties, and the transparency of the I.F.E., have not only strengthened civic pride, but assured Mexico of its place in the world as a prime example of the world's strong and vital democracies."

The I.F.E., or Federal Electoral Institute, runs the elections.

Mr. López Obrador, who has made a career of challenging elections, prepared to try to prove that the electoral system remained flawed. His case before the Federal Electoral Tribunal could delay declaring a new president until September.

Advisers to Mr. López Obrador, a former mayor of Mexico City, said he would challenge the results in one-third of the 130,000 polling places, focusing on sites with many null votes or where his party did not have representatives to oversee the count.

The advisers acknowledged that the errors found in each ballot box opened in the final count were small, but argued that together they could add up to enough votes to change the result.

"If they recount the votes and Calderón wins by one vote, then it ends," said Mayor-Elect Marcelo Ebrard of Mexico City, a close adviser to Mr. López Obrador. "If they don't count the votes, there will always be a doubt."

If the court does not order a recount, Mr. López Obrador left little doubt at a news conference on Thursday that he was considering mass marches as a next step. "It's our right," he said.

Rumbling beneath the confidence in one camp and outrage in the other was a debate on whether the most competitive elections in Mexican history had been good or bad. For some people, the cascade of results raised ghosts from a not-too-distant past when the state manipulated elections. Other people feared that if Mexico continued to bow to the old ghosts, it would never break free of them.

About the only thing that seemed clear was that Mexico has been polarized. Speaking randomly to average Calderón supporters and then to people who support Mr. López Obrador was like playing hopscotch across the gaping economic divide.

Manuel Arango, a wealthy real estate developer who is active in philanthropies, echoed the feelings of many supporters of Mr. Calderón when he said, "I hope that everything plays out within the institutions and not on the street."

Juan Huerta, 55, who works at a newsstand near a luxury department store, said he thought that the election was riddled with fraud. Mr. Huerta said he tried to cast a ballot for Mr. López Obrador, but was told that rain had soaked all the ballots. "This is a fraud against the people," he said.

"The PAN is playing with the country's social peace" he added about the governing party. "If there's violence, then so be it. People are fed up. That's why they had the revolution."