

Calderón Says He Would Accept Partial Recount

Winner of Disputed Mexican Vote Chides Bush Aide on Border Wall Comment
The Washington Post
July 12, 2006

MEXICO CITY, July 11 -- Felipe Calderón, a free-trade booster who was declared the winner of Mexico's disputed presidential election last week, said Tuesday that he would accept a partial recount but that a complete recount would be "absurd" and illegal.

Calderón's main opponent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, has alleged widespread election fraud, called massive street protests and asked Mexico's special electoral court to order a recount of votes cast in all 130,000 polling stations. In his first international media interview since being declared winner, Calderón said Tuesday that he would abide by the decision of the court, even if it orders a recount of as many as 50,000 polling places.

"I will respect what the tribunal says," said Calderón, of the National Action Party.

During the wide-ranging interview at his Mexico City campaign headquarters, Calderón also took exception to remarks made Monday by President Bush's spokesman, Tony Snow, about Calderón's opposition to building more walls on the U.S.-Mexico border. Snow told reporters that the "last time I checked, Calderón did not have any official authority over the activities of the United States government."

In the interview, Calderón said, "President Bush's spokesman is someone who does not have the authority to tell me what I should be saying."

Calderón also repeated his contention that the immigration problem "cannot be solved with walls." And he said he would rather see "one kilometer of road built in Michoacan or Zacatecas than 10 kilometers of wall in Texas or California."

Repeating one of his campaign proposals, Calderón said he would try to persuade Canada and the United States to invest in Mexican development projects to create jobs and stem illegal immigration. He also said he planned to stiffen enforcement of Mexico's southern border -- a major gateway for Central American migrants on their way to Washington and other major cities -- by increasing the use of technology, such as sensors.

Mexican presidents should talk about "common problems" the country shares with the United States, he said, citing drug trafficking, immigration and the border. Calderón wants to establish an immigration accord with the United States, a goal that eluded outgoing President Vicente Fox. Calderón said he would try to avoid errors made by Fox, though he declined to be specific.

Calderón is clinging to a half-percentage-point lead -- 243,000 votes out of 41 million cast -- after an official tally last week. By law, the result must be certified by Mexico's special elections court, known as the Federal Electoral Judicial Tribunal, which will also hear López Obrador's challenge. The court has until Sept. 6 to name the winner, and Calderón said Tuesday that he expected the fight to drag out until the deadline.

Calderón and his legal team contend that Mexican election law will allow only the reopening and recounting of sealed voting packets that appear to have been altered or have other irregularities. The legal contest is the stiffest challenge ever for the court, which has annulled some local and gubernatorial elections but has never heard a case of this magnitude.

While the court is reviewing the case, Calderón said, he will attempt to prevent "the escalation of tensions" by refusing to call his supporters into the streets to counter López Obrador's. But Calderón said he expects López Obrador to continue calling for massive protests because "he is a man who has habitually not respected the law."

Their battle has drawn comparisons to the 2000 U.S. presidential election dispute.

"The great crisis of American democracy presents itself when there is a conflict between the candidate who gets the most votes and the candidate who wins the electoral college," Calderón said, outlining the Bush vs. Gore scenario of 2000. If not for the U.S. electoral college system, he said, "there never would have been any doubt about the triumph of Al Gore."

Calderón said he would not favor Mexico switching from its single-election presidential system to primaries and runoffs, like those in the United States. "The truth is that the best democratic system is the direct-voting method, which is what we have here in Mexico," he said.

Calderón has kept a low profile since Saturday, when López Obrador, a populist favorite of the poor, drew 280,000 people to a rally in downtown Mexico City. During that time, Mexico's political world has been abuzz over news reports that said Calderón would consider offering a job in his cabinet to López Obrador. López Obrador immediately said he would not accept.

But during the interview Tuesday, Calderón said that his remarks were misinterpreted and that he would not offer López Obrador a job. Instead, he said he was trying to make the point that he would reach out to other political parties and include them in his government.

During the interview, conducted in Spanish, an alarm on Calderón's computer squawked. He got up and shut it off. He returned and said he liked technological devices, using the English word "gadgets."

During the campaign, commentators noted that, if elected, López Obrador would be the first Mexican president in decades who did not speak English. Calderón, on the other hand, has a public policy degree from Harvard University and would be expected to continue the streak of English-speaking leaders. But since his victory, he has yet to speak English at a public gathering.

Asked Tuesday when the public might hear him speak English, Calderón smiled. He needed to do something first, he said: practice.