

Videos, Doubts, and a Backlash in Mexico Vote

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MEXICO CITY, July 13 — To an untrained eye, the scenes captured on video certainly looked like [Mexico](#)'s bad old days when votes were stolen instead of won. There was a man inside a polling station stuffing one vote after another into a ballot box.

[Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), the embattled leftist candidate for president, showed the video to a crowd of reporters on Monday morning and called it proof that poll workers had taken part in a conspiracy of fraud that robbed him of victory and handed it to his conservative rival, [Felipe Calderón](#).

That night, the Federal Electoral Institute, or IFE, and Mr. López Obrador's own representative at the polling station said Mr. López Obrador was misrepresenting the video. The tape, they said, showed a poll worker putting misplaced ballots where they belonged, a common procedure that was perfectly legal.

By then, however, doubt had already been planted. Mr. López Obrador has bet his political future that it will not take much to make that doubt grow into a national call for a recount in a country where rigging elections was once a kind of national pastime. His opponents in Mr. Calderón's camp are betting people will see things the way they do: that the only one playing dirty these days is Mr. López Obrador.

In an interview on Thursday, Mr. Calderón, who election officials say squeaked out a victory by 0.6 percent of the vote, said that Mr. López Obrador had not kept his promise during the campaign to accept the election results, win or lose.

"It seems to me that the responsible thing to do is to respect the authorities," said Mr. Calderón, who has yet to be formally certified as the winner, "and not to heighten tensions in the political atmosphere."

"I don't want to launch a personal attack on him," Mr. Calderón added. "What I do think is that Mexico has a solid democratic system, credible

institutions, like the electoral institute and the electoral tribunal, and that it's not right that they be discredited, especially without proof.”

In the 11 days since the closest election in Mexican history, Mr. López Obrador has tried to discredit those institutions and the election on two fronts. Last weekend he filed a massive complaint — including nine boxes of documents and tapes — to the Federal Electoral Tribunal, alleging irregularities at more 52,000 polling places and calling for a recount.

At the same time, he opened a campaign to cast doubt on the election, feeding the media daily doses of scandal in videotapes and what he describes as secret recordings and tally sheets with incorrect numbers.

On Saturday in the Zócalo, Mexico City's historic plaza, a confident Mr. López Obrador regaled some 150,000 supporters with a recording of a conversation that he said proved collusion by rival political parties.

He followed up at the press conference on Monday with the now disputed video that he said proved poll workers had inflated vote counts for his rival. He screened another video on Tuesday that he said showed electoral officials illegally tampering with ballot boxes. And on Wednesday, he played a video that he said showed poll workers recording more inflated tallies for Mr. Calderón.

While the tapes were tantalizing, legal experts said they hardly made Mr. López Obrador's case for systematic violations that would support his demand for a vote-by-vote recount, and many analysts were concluding that the campaign was more smoke than fire.

The Federal Electoral Institute has fired back with a campaign of its own, including public service announcements and full-page advertisements in Mexico's major daily newspapers. In a recent press conference, Hugo Concha, a spokesman for IFE, said there was no evidence of fraud in any of the videos.

Nor, he said, were they recorded in secret. Cameras were allowed in district offices during the official vote tallying, Mr. Concha said. And he said the videos screened by Mr. López Obrador showed normal, legal activities.

“In other words,” Mr. Concha said, “he is misusing the information.”

That seems to be the way Juliana Barrón Vallejo sees things. She is a former factory worker in Guanajuato State who represented Mr. López Obrador’s campaign at the polling place where the video shown on Monday had been recorded.

“There was no fraud,” she said in a telephone interview. “Everything was clean.” Then, referring to Mr. López Obrador, she said, “I think he is angry because he lost, and so he is inventing things.”

Comments like those from Ms. Barrón, which have also been reported here in the newspaper Reforma, stung the López Obrador campaign. But Mr. López Obrador’s response shook his supporters’ confidence even further, as he refused to back away from the video and implied that his own campaign worker had been corrupted.

“I cannot say that all my representatives acted honestly,” Mr. López Obrador said at a press conference on Tuesday. “There is a lot of money out there. Unfortunately, some people are willing to sell their dignity.”

As for the Federal Electoral Institute, Mr. López Obrador said: “The IFE is trying to cover up an embarrassment that is making news around the world. What we are showing is that in this election we have not moved forward. We have moved backward.”

Some, including the leftist scholar Roger Bartra, say that Mr. López Obrador has not only damaged himself, but that he has also set Mexico on a dangerous course.

Other political analysts, like Jorge Montaña, say Mr. López Obrador has capitalized on the overwhelming lack of confidence most Mexicans feel toward their institutions, and has shifted the debate from one about who won the election, to one about whether to reopen the ballots.

“Public confidence has fallen so low,” Mr. Montaña said, “that it is almost inevitable there will have to be some kind of verification that Felipe Calderón won the presidency.”

Mr. López Obrador's appearances at press conferences and on television this week indicated that he was prepared for a long fight. That became clear in a heated exchange between Mr. López Obrador, the populist former Mexico City mayor, and Mexico's leading news anchor, Joaquín López-Dóriga, Tuesday night:

Mr. López-Dóriga: Where is this going to end, Andrés Manuel? How far are you going to take it?

Mr. López Obrador: To the people.

Mr. López-Dóriga: How far is that?

Mr. López Obrador: As far as the people want and decide.

Mr. López-Dóriga: But you are driving this process.

Mr. López Obrador: Yes, but we are going to drive it democratically.

Mr. Calderón's aides contend that what Mr. López Obrador really wants is to use a recount as the first step to annulling the election. Echoing analyses by electoral officials, they say it is unlikely that a recount would change the results because the candidates would be likely to gain and lose votes in similar proportions.

But any broad recount, Mr. Calderón's aides say, is bound to uncover human errors, and perhaps isolated, but not systematic, cases of fraud, that could be used to throw out all the returns. "The tactic might be a recount, but the endgame is annulment," said Arturo Sarukhán, an aide to Mr. Calderón.

Mr. López Obrador, 53, has repeatedly denied he wants a new election. He won this one, he said, adding, "I am more and more convinced of this."

For his part, Mr. Calderón has stood firm, planning a tour of the country, sending aides to calm anxieties abroad, appointing officials to lead a transition team and playing down the demonstrations in favor of Mr. López Obrador.

"Elections are won at the polls," Mr. Calderón said, "not on the streets."

