

## Mexico's Losing Leftist Defiantly Awaits Election Ruling



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Andrés Manuel López Obrador, before a bust of Mexico's liberal reformer Benito Juárez, contends that a broad conspiracy has tried to rob him of his rightful  
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MEXICO CITY, July 22 — As he fights his loss in court, the leftist candidate in [Mexico's](#) July 2 election says he has been the victim of a broad conspiracy among the incumbent, election officials, other party leaders and business tycoons to rob him of the presidency.

The candidate, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), charged in an interview on Friday that the vote had been plagued by fraud and widespread human errors. He made it clear he would not accept any ruling from the special electoral court short of an order to recount all 41 million ballots.

How far he would take acts of civil disobedience to protest the results would be guided by “the feelings of the people,” he said. Without a recount, he said, the peace of the country is in jeopardy, a threat his opponents have said amounts to blackmail.

“One can interpret it however one likes,” he said in the interview, at his campaign headquarters here.

“It's very simple,” he added. “If we permit electoral fraud, we are accepting that they violate our human rights, and we are not ready to accept that those who voted be insulted. We are going to defend the vote. We are going to defend the democracy.”

Two weeks ago, an official vote tally showed the conservative candidate, [Felipe Calderón](#), of the National Action Party, or PAN, had won by a narrow margin of 243,000. The election is far from over, however. A special electoral court must still rule on hundreds of challenges from both sides before approving the results and naming a victor.

Since the official count, Mr. López Obrador, 52, a former mayor of Mexico City who champions the cause of Mexico's poor, has been playing a high-stakes game of brinkmanship, appearing on television to hurl allegations of fraud and leading mass demonstrations to demand a recount.

He contends he has found errors in arithmetic in some 72,000 polling places — more than half of the total. He also maintains he has found evidence of fraud in which poll workers took votes away from him or padded the vote for his opponent in dozens of polling places. He has held two marches attended by hundreds of thousands of people and has called on his followers to engage in unspecified acts of civil disobedience.

One problem now for Mr. López Obrador is how to maintain his movement's momentum for what could be weeks before a decision from the tribunal without spurring his supporters to violence. So far, he has managed to cry fraud while still keeping his protests peaceful. But as the weeks wear on and the court does its work, that balance may become harder to maintain. The tribunal has until Sept. 6 to rule.

In the meantime, Mr. López Obrador has repeatedly challenged his opponent to agree to a recount, arguing that it is the only way to preserve the peace. Even if Mr. Calderón agreed, however, the decision would still be up to the tribunal.

"If he is sure of having won, he doesn't have any reason to refuse a recount," Mr. López Obrador said. "Because if he should win, it would strengthen him, he would obtain legitimacy that he doesn't have because of the unfair way the election was carried out."

Mr. Calderón, a 42-year-old former energy minister, has said that there is no legal basis for counting the ballots a second time and that Mr. López Obrador is trying to win in the streets what he could not win at the ballot box.

Mr. López Obrador's incessant drumbeat for a recount has heightened tensions here. This week vandals destroyed billboards and artwork supporting him, while his supporters pounded and kicked Mr. Calderón's car, an act he refused to condemn.

Beyond his defiant talk, however, lies the uncomfortable fact that Mr. López Obrador has been declared the apparent loser after frittering away a huge lead in a campaign that, as late as March, every political analyst expected he would win.

The reasons for his remarkable fall are several, pollsters and political strategists say. First, the turnout in states where Mr. López Obrador was strongest was lower than in the northern states, where Mr. Calderón's party has its base.

Analysts said Mr. López Obrador might have discouraged his supporters from turning out by insisting until his final rally that he was 10 points ahead and would easily win, even when all the polls, including his own internal surveys, showed a neck-and-neck race at the end.

Second, significant numbers of voters from the third major party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, shifted their support to Mr. Calderón in the final days, several pollsters said.

In no small measure, the shift occurred because the leader of the national teachers union, Elba Esther Gordillo, a former member of the PRI, decided to throw her weight behind Mr. Calderón after she had a falling out with her party's candidate. Several political experts said this move alone gave Mr. Calderón at least 500,000 votes, twice the winning margin.

Finally, most analysts agree, Mr. López Obrador never fully recovered from Mr. Calderón's negative advertising blitz that depicted him as a closet leftist dictator and "a danger to Mexico."

Though the Calderón campaign took the advertisements off the air in late May, the damage had been done, and business leaders picked up the slack in the last two weeks of the campaign, paying millions for ads that warned voters against the dangers of leftist dictators, without mentioning Mr. López Obrador by name.

For Mr. López Obrador, the election night results were a heavy blow. Feeding his sense of disappointment, and his distrust of the results, were the memories of two other elections he believed had been robbed from him, he said.

In 1988, he lost a race for the governorship of Tabasco in an election most historians regard as fraudulent. Then, in 1994, he lost a second race for the governorship, and government investigators later determined his opponent spent millions of dollars to buy votes.

Mr. López Obrador acknowledged Mexico's electoral system has improved since then, when a one-party state controlled the vote count. But he maintains that this time he was the victim of a more sophisticated scheme to stop him from taking office.

For starters, he said, the PRI and the PAN conspired to join forces against him in the north, and his opponents outspent him three to one on television advertisements.

More important, in his view, President Vicente Fox campaigned against him illegally and used government programs to help Mr. Calderón, his party's candidate.

Business leaders linked to the president, meanwhile, began an illegal last-minute blizzard of attack ads against him, he says.

"They, along with the president, are the real coordinators of the PAN's campaign," he said. "It cannot be that with money and influence peddling and dirty tricks they can impose a president on the people."

He added: "Compared to 2000, these elections are dirtier. Personally, it's very disappointing."

Mr. López Obrador said that if a recount showed he had lost, he would call off demonstrations, but that he would never accept Mr. Calderón's victory as legitimate.

Some aides say Mr. López Obrador is fighting for a recount to solidify his position as the leader of Mexico's left and keep his coalition together.

Other analysts say Mr. López Obrador is likely to use protests, strikes and whatever opposition alliance he can cobble together in Congress to thwart changes in the state-owned energy sector, the judicial system and the tax system that Mr. Calderón says the country needs to become more competitive.

For now, Mr. López Obrador declines to speculate about his future role. He also will not to say what he would do if the court refuses his demand for a recount, other than to say he will follow the will of his supporters.

"We will go along watching the opinion of the people," he said. "If the people say that we have to carry out actions of civil disobedience, rough and forceful, we will carry them out. If the people say that we should act with less belligerence, that's how it will go."