

Obrador takes risk with Mexico protests

The presidential contender may alienate his supporters with capital city disruptions.

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MEXICO CITY – No one was surprised that Andrés Manuel López Obrador contested Mexico's July 2 election - the closest in the nation's history - by calling mass street protests and submitting numerous documents alleging fraud.

When he declared himself president to a US-based television network last week, some eyebrows went up. Now he is orchestrating permanent protest camps along a main thoroughfare of the traffic-choked capital in a bid to sway an electoral court to grant a full recount.

Some are wondering: Has he gone too far? The civil resistance campaign, which is causing major disruptions and which some likened to "hostage taking," is dividing a polarized country and could ultimately cost the leftist candidate those supporters who feel he has crossed the line and worry about how far he is willing to go.

"There are a lot of people supporting him in a recount of the votes. But in blocking [the center of the city], he is going to lose a lot of people who have been backing him all along," says Rafael Fernández de Castro, chairman of the international studies program at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM) who backs neither candidate. "Why take this city hostage? It seems to me in the end this will backfire."

Some of Mr. Obrador's voters are already disillusioned. "I voted for him, but I can no longer support him, starting today," says Mateo de la Cruz, a parking attendant who stood in front of an empty lot that he says would normally be full. "Now he is hurting me personally."

For those participating in the protests, many who spent the day playing chess or cards and eating lunch together, charges of "hijacking" and "conspiracy" are exaggerated.

On Sunday, Obrador, of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), attracted one of the largest crowds ever to fill the city's main square, the Zocalo. The Reforma, a tree-lined boulevard that houses the US Embassy and major corporations and cuts through the heart of Mexico City, ground to a halt Monday, with Obrador supporters pitching tents and their kids kicking footballs where cars normally whiz by.

"We will do whatever it takes for him to win," says Maria Guadalupe Chavarria, who was knitting a blanket in the middle of the street Monday and says she will take turns with others from Mexico City until they succeed. She shrugs off inconveniences caused to thousands of city residents. "Our fight is a peaceful one."

Obrador indeed urged his supporters Sunday to stay nonviolent, and addressed the hassles such a protest will produce, especially for his rivals. "I hope that some day they will understand us," he told the crowd, estimated at over a million, "understand that this struggle is necessary, not just for us but for everyone."

The 2006 race pitted free-trade advocate Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN) against former Mexico City mayor and advocate of the poor Obrador. Mr. Calderón came out on top with a little more than half a percentage point. It was the first election since President Vicente Fox, also of the PAN, took power from the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), whose candidate finished July's race in third place.

The seven judges of the electoral court must order a partial or full recount of the vote by Aug. 31. They could also annul the election, but that is considered unlikely. Obrador has said he will accept nothing less than a full recount.

His mass resistance might pressure the court to heed his calls, say supporters and opponents alike. Any court, especially one just 10 years old, has room for discretion in interpreting the law, says Laura Carlsen, director of the Americas program for the left-leaning International Relations Center in Mexico City. "They have the responsibility to take into account what is going to be best for the nation at this juncture," she says. "Having people in the streets from all over the country ... is significant pressure."

But the resistance could also backfire. A survey by the polling firm Ipsos-Bimsa shows that 52.5 percent of those surveyed July 21-24 believe Calderón won July 2, and 48 percent said they would support a recount.

"The majority is in favor of a recount, but with more radical measures, most of his supporters are not going to be willing to do that," says Alberto Aziz, an analyst at the Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology. "Before there were no mechanisms in place to resolve [electoral] conflicts," such as the electoral court.

Francisco Sanchez Gonzalez exemplifies a resident who voted for Obrador but does not consider himself a hardcore supporter. He says he has been disillusioned by the calls for civil resistance. "Many of those people are there because [the PRD] is paying them to be there," he says, "meanwhile we are all losing money."

Other critics are emerging too. A Monday editorial in La Jornada newspaper, which has generally supported Obrador, criticized him for blocking streets that aggravate the lives of "third parties." Analysts such as Mr. de Castro from ITAM say they worry this protest is exacerbating Mexico's so-called "red-blue" divide. "[The two sides] have become ideological faith communities," he says. "I don't see the PAN or PRD trying to cross over and build bridges."