

## Mexican Runner-Up Remains Defiant

The Washington Post  
August 7, 2006

MEXICO CITY, Aug. 6 -- Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the runner-up in Mexico's presidential election whose supporters have erected tent cities to protest the results of the July 2 vote, said Sunday that the political crisis would not be resolved by the partial recount ordered by the country's highest electoral court.

Speaking inside the 18-by-9-foot tent where he has lived for the past week, López Obrador was utterly defiant. He will not accept results of the partial recount, he declared during his first interview since a special election court on Saturday rejected his request for a full recount. And he said he would not ask his supporters to disperse even though they have brought gridlock to Mexico City's downtown.

An annulment of the election would also not be acceptable, López Obrador said, declaring that a full recount is the only option that could bring an end to the massive protests he has inspired.

"I could not accept any other outcome," he said, sitting at a plastic, folding camping table with a large Mexican flag and a dangling camping lantern behind him.

However, López Obrador said he would accept the results -- even if he was declared the loser -- of a full recount.

López Obrador smiled and laughed often during the wide-ranging, hour-long interview, which he conducted inside the tent, steps from the ceremonial National Palace and the balcony where presidents appear each Sept. 15 to commemorate the Mexican Revolution.

Ranchero music blasted so loudly from nearby speakers that López Obrador, his voice raspy from a month of rallies, sometimes had to lean forward to be heard. Outside, tens of thousands of demonstrators mingled on the downtown square, the Zocalo. Dozens napped on blankets thrown atop wooden pallets -- their homes since López Obrador called for a campaign of peaceful civil resistance.

López Obrador's critics have accused him of trampling on Mexico's fragile democracy by lambasting and defying the rulings of the electoral commission and its courts -- cornerstones of Mexico's democratic transition after seven decades of one-party rule. But he said it is his opponent -- Felipe Calderón, a free-trade advocate from outgoing President Vicente Fox's National Action Party -- and his opponent's party that "prefer to take this country into a crisis."

"Why don't they get me out of the way by accepting a full recount?" said López Obrador, who trails Calderón by half a percentage point, or 240,000 out of 41 million votes cast.

Some commentators have fretted that López Obrador's protest movement will turn violent. During the interview, López Obrador said he was not concerned that the protests -- which have been peaceful so far -- would spiral out of control and lead to instability.

"They always think the public is irrational," López Obrador said.

Responding to another question about the possibility of instability, López Obrador waved his arms toward the throngs on the Zocalo.

"This is instability," he said.

López Obrador's request for a full recount was turned down by the Federal Electoral Judicial Tribunal, which on Wednesday will begin overseeing a recount of votes cast in 9 percent of polling places and has until Sept. 6 to certify a winner. López Obrador's campaign estimates that 3.5 million votes will be recounted and believes it is unlikely that the partial recount will shift results in his favor.

"With such a small number recounted, they are not going to resolve this problem," López Obrador said.

A quarter of the polling places to be recounted are in the state of Jalisco, a Calderón stronghold anchored by the business hub of Guadalajara. Another 1,100 polling places will be recounted in Baja California, a region where Calderón drew strong support from business groups drawn to his pledge to expand Mexico's role in the global economy and encourage free trade.

"They think we're going to wear out," López Obrador said. "I can assure we're not going to wear out. When I try to defend my principles, I continue defending them even if I end up standing alone."

As he spoke, a matchbox with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's most revered saint, lay on the table and an image of Saint Judas Tadeo dangled from the tent frame. Mexico's best-known historian, Enrique Krauze, has dubbed López Obrador "a tropical messiah." But López Obrador mocked the moniker Sunday and declined to discuss his religious beliefs.

López Obrador got his start in politics in the eastern state of Tabasco, a swampy region known for its insularity and its history of colorful demagogic politicians. He takes his nickname -- "El Peje" -- from a water creature that thrives in Tabasco known as a *pejelagarto*, which has the body of a fish and a head similar to an alligator's.

During the interview, López Obrador -- a former Mexico City mayor -- described Mexico as a "racist" and "classist" country dominated by men who "are not businessmen, but are traffickers in influence." Opinion polling conducted since the election suggests that darker-

skinned indigenous peoples supported him and his Democratic Revolutionary Party while lighter-skinned Mexicans supported Calderón, advisers said.

Mexico has a huge gap between the rich and poor -- nowhere more noticeable than in Mexico City, where a large elite class shops at Christofle and Cartier while millions live in grinding poverty. The poor are López Obrador's most ardent followers, but he said he is not a populist. "I am a leftist," he said.

He acknowledged that he makes the upper classes uncomfortable, saying that "they have a profound fear of losing their privileges."

López Obrador scoffed at attempts by the Calderón campaign to paint him as "a danger to Mexico" who would foment policies similar to the authoritarian style of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. During the campaign, critics resurrected allegations that he was responsible for the long-ago shooting death of his brother. López Obrador said that "there is not one bit of proof" that he was responsible.

"I'm pained" by the allegations, he said.

López Obrador's week-long vigil has coincided with unseasonably cold temperatures in Mexico City, which has been battered by torrential rain and several bursts of snow so unusual that they spawned front-page headlines. But López Obrador, who lives in a modest apartment, said the conditions were no bother.

He slept on the ground for much of the six years he worked with indigenous people in Tabasco. By comparison, his Zocalo accommodations are plush. Asked for a glimpse of his bedroom, he pulled aside a tarp and chuckled a bit at the sight of his low-slung cot.