

López Obrador's support dwindling

Mexico is starting to turn its back on Andrés Manuel López Obrador because of his refusal to concede defeat in the disputed presidential election.

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MEXICO CITY - In the days after ballot results showed him losing an agonizingly close presidential election, candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador was in fine form, leading the largest rallies Mexico has ever seen and convincing most Mexicans of the need for a recount.

Six weeks later, the Mexican public has largely turned its back on the charismatic leftist, who has been transformed into a marginal figure -- to a degree even within his own party.

If the July 2 election were held now, conservative Felipe Calderón would trounce López Obrador by 24 percentage points, a recent newspaper poll showed.

Some analysts say the former Mexico City mayor has done irreparable harm to his political career by sowing unrest and refusing to accept the constitutional rules for resolving the close election.

Mexico in 2006 is often compared to the disputed U.S. presidential election of 2000 between George Bush and Al Gore, where results in Florida and elsewhere were questioned. Initial results showed Calderón with a razor thin lead amid allegations of balloting irregularities.

The difference is that López Obrador, 53, has refused to recognize the authority of the court that ruled against him or concede defeat in the name of political harmony, analysts say.

The metaphor often used in the Mexican press is that of a martyr, burning himself alive.

"One thing is for certain," wrote political columnist José María Carmona last week in the Change of Michoacan newspaper. "The political career of López Obrador is entering its final phase."

López Obrador last week lost his bid to convince Mexico's highest electoral court to reverse the razor-thin victory of Calderón, 44.

Despite producing boxes of documents, López Obrador was never able to prove his allegation that widespread fraud robbed him of the presidency.

The federal court is expected to name Calderón president today.

López Obrador has also lost the battle for public opinion, with many moderate supporters who nearly carried him to victory turned off by his increasingly confrontational protest movement.

"He pushed a little too hard," said Rossana Fuentes-Berain, political analyst at the Mexico Institute of Technology. "He has become a person whose actions prove what his critics were afraid of -- that he won't abide by the rules."

A POTENTIAL CRISIS

That leaves Calderón, who will take office Dec. 1, facing a potential crisis as López Obrador's diehard supporters vow to continue a campaign of civil disobedience. And it has left foreign investors wary of Mexico's democratic stability at a time when the country has been making strides in the global marketplace.

In early July, López Obrador's transformation from crusader to spoiler seemed unfathomable.

In a two-week span after the voting, he convened two of the largest demonstrations in the history of Mexico, a show of strength that seemed to mirror a growing wave of support. López Obrador was succeeding in planting the seeds of doubt in the minds of most Mexicans that the election had been rigged, or at least riddled with irregularities.

But on July 30, in a political bungle that some experts say will become legend, López Obrador went from the victim to the victimizer. He directed his supporters to seize a five-mile stretch of one of Mexico City's most commercially important boulevards, the Paseo de Reforma. Supporters set up a tent city, complete with kitchens and soccer fields, on the busy thoroughfare. The move paralyzed traffic throughout the city and wounded local businesses.

The street seizure immediately divided López Obrador's movement.

López Obrador was also failing to convince the public and the electoral tribunal of widespread fraud. His allegations, critics complained, were unfocused and contradictory: one day he claimed computer-based fraud, on another old-fashioned ballot stuffing.

SINKING SUPPORT

Meanwhile, the number of supporters attending his rallies steadily decreased -- from a peak of more than one million, according to some estimates, to just a few thousand. The population of his tent city dwindled. And the tenor of his speeches became ever more strident.

He has accused the seven judges of being on the take, called their verdict a "coup d'etat," urged his supporters not to recognize Calderón and threatened to set up a parallel government with himself as the people's president.

Some moderate supporters say they don't see a place for themselves in López Obrador's campaign, which has become more of a social movement than an election protest.

Experts say López Obrador's Democratic Revolution Party, the PRD, is likely to begin distancing itself from him, especially now that it has the second-most seats in Congress behind Calderón's National Action Party and can play a larger role in shaping reforms than ever before.

So why did López Obrador pursue such a confrontational course and restrict any possibility of compromise, even if it would have helped him politically?

"He honestly believes he was robbed and that massive fraud was committed," Fuentes-Berain said.