

Leftist's Backers End Blockade in Mexico City

The New York Times
September 15, 2006

MEXICO CITY, Sept. 14 — Supporters of a leftist candidate who narrowly lost the presidential election this summer were tearing down five miles of tents on Thursday that have blockaded this capital's central avenues for six weeks.

"It's an emotional situation," Juan Gutiérrez Calva, 45, a street vendor, said as he packed up his tent. "I'm calm. I'm not sad or happy. It was always clear that we were not going to advance much toward a real democracy in this country."

The move signaled a shift by their leader, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), the former mayor of Mexico City, who says he was robbed of an election victory.

Having lost a legal battle for a full recount, and facing a steady defection of supporters, Mr. López Obrador is now striving to find a way to remain a political force over the coming six years, while [Felipe Calderón](#), a conservative, serves as president.

Mr. López Obrador and his aides have organized a mass rally for Saturday, grandly calling it the "National Democratic Convention," where supporters are expected to anoint Mr. López Obrador head of a movement still ill defined that will, among other things, press for a new Mexican constitution.

"This political regime no longer works," Mr. López Obrador said earlier this week. "It's rotten and we must construct something new, and that is what we are going to do at the National Democratic Convention."

In recent days, Mr. López Obrador has decided to lift his blockade in the heart of the capital, which has caused weeks of chaos and tension, and avoid a conflict with the military during its annual parade on Saturday.

The softening of strategy comes as cracks are beginning to appear in Mr. López Obrador's coalition, with the court's decision last week to support Mr. Calderón's election victory.

Now even Mr. López Obrador's aides acknowledge that he is losing some support among middle-class liberals and influential leftist politicians and intellectuals, as Mexicans seem prepared to move on from the election dispute, even if Mr. López Obrador is not.

The founder of his party, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, for instance, published a letter on Thursday accusing Mr. López Obrador and his inner circle of being intolerant of dissent.

“It worries me profoundly, the intolerance and demonization, the dogmatic attitude that prevails around Andrés Manuel for those of us who do not accept unconditionally his proposals and who question his points of view and decisions,” he wrote.

And Carlos Fuentes, the giant of Mexican letters, also assailed Mr. López Obrador this week for continuing to insist there was widespread fraud in the election, while he never challenged the elections of his party’s members to the Legislature.

“There could have been fraud in the Chamber of Deputies, there could have been fraud in the Senate, but there wasn’t,” he said. “There was only fraud for the presidency of the republic. How strange, no? I don’t believe it.”

There have been other signs of weakening support. Mr. López Obrador’s party voted down a slate of his closest allies for leadership positions in Congress, choosing the leaders of other factions. Two prominent governors from his party have also recognized Mr. Calderón’s victory.

The questioning extends to the voters. Several said in interviews that the prolonged blockade of the city’s central avenues and main square, as well as Mr. López Obrador’s refusal to concede defeat, only confirmed the accusations of his political enemies that he was autocratic and had little regard for courts or the law.

“It left me with a bad taste in my mouth,” said Berenice Malagón, a 27-year-old employee of a cosmetics company. “I know he has a right to protest, but what is not right is to close the avenues and sources of work and generate instability.”

Despite the loss of some support, the leftist leader still has enough loyal supporters to make trouble for the government. Politicians in Mr. López Obrador’s camp are scrambling to find a way to wield their power in Congress while still supporting him.

On Thursday morning, three former campaign aides and several leaders of his Party of the Democratic Revolution, along with the Workers’ Party and the

Convergence Party, announced the formation of the “Wide Progressive National Front.”

The politicians said their goal was to help Mr. López Obrador and his supporters in the street achieve their goals in the Congress. The lawmakers must walk a fine line, however.

Mr. López Obrador still maintains the election was fraudulent, but his party has also gained enough seats to become the second largest faction in Congress. Few of those newly elected lawmakers are willing to follow their leader into the political wilderness.

Mr. López Obrador’s closest advisers hope the national convention on Saturday, coupled with the formation of the “progressive front” in Congress, is the solution. The scheme allows him to become the leader of what amounts to a shadow government or a permanent protest movement. It gives him a way to criticize Mr. Calderón, push for constitutional change, oppose the sale of state oil reserves and remain in the limelight.

Manuel Camacho, a close adviser, said the idea was to remake Mr. López Obrador, 53, into a civil rights leader, a “symbolic figure on the model of [Martin Luther King](#).”

“I see him as a moral leader in this scheme, someone who promotes the interests of the poor, strengthens their rights and will promote a change in political institutions,” Mr. Camacho said.