

State race signals big defeat for Mexican leftist

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MEXICO CITY – Andrés Manuel López Obrador jolted Mexico City when he moved protesters to close down main streets in the wake of the nation's disputed July 2 presidential election. The dissent reached its peak when supporters named the defeated leftist president of a "parallel government" at a mass demonstration this fall.

But a month later, his supporters have packed up their tents, traffic is flowing, and many are wondering if his protest movement - which emerged amid allegations of massive electoral fraud - is now losing steam.

This weekend, a gubernatorial race in Tabasco - which voted heavily for Mr. Obrador, a native of the southern state - ended in defeat for the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) candidate, despite Obrador having campaigned hard for his fellow party member. The loss is being viewed as a referendum on the future of Obrador's national protest movement.

"This is a reflection of his losing track with voters," says Rafael Fernandez de Castro, dean of international affairs at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico. "The consequences are not going to be very good for [Obrador] or his movement."

The July 2006 presidential election was the closest in the nation's history, with the two main candidates split by half a percentage point. In September, after a lengthy and tense court review and partial recount, electoral officials finally certified Felipe Calderón, of President Vicente Fox's conservative National Action Party (PAN), as the official president-elect.

Parallel government?

Leading up to the certification, Obrador and his supporters, who halted downtown traffic for seven weeks, pledged never to accept Calderón as president. Calling him a "usurper," they voted last month to establish their own government, causing columnists to question the stability of the country.

But these days even Obrador's supporters doubt that his parallel movement will amount to much. Although Mario Gutierrez, a valet in Mexico City, says he believes in Obrador's ideals and voted for him in the election, he also believes the movement is petering out. "It's a lost cause," he says. "They aren't going to gain anything."

Asked whether he believes a parallel government will be effective in helping the nation's poor, he says matter-of-factly: "I don't think there will be a parallel government."

Indeed, the defeat in Tabasco state could hinder efforts to forge a national movement. Obrador won 56 percent of the presidential vote in Tabasco, and spent recent weeks with PRD candidate César Raúl Ojeda. When the Monitor went to press, 94 percent of the votes had been counted and Andrés Granier, of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had 53 percent of the vote compared with 42.8 percent for Ojeda, making it statistically impossible for Ojeda to win. Ojeda alleges fraud and is threatening to challenge the results.

Obrador himself seemed to anticipate a loss ahead of the elections by telling reporters: "If the PRI wins Tabasco, then our adversaries will laugh at us and say that we even lose in our own land."

Obrador spokesperson César Yañez disputes the fact that a defeat in Tabasco spells trouble for the movement. "Its success does not depend on a state election," he says, "no matter what state it is."

But some say Obrador's protests after the presidential vote this summer may have hurt Ojeda's chances, and could deter others from linking themselves to his movement. "It will make some of the PRD leaders start distancing themselves from [Obrador]," says Mr. Fernandez de Castro.

Mr. Gutierrez says he believes Obrador's barricades in Mexico City backfired. This sentiment is backed by polls, such as one in the newspaper Reforma this summer that showed that if the election had occurred in the midst of Obrador's mass sit-ins, Calderón would have won the race easily.

According to the Associated Press, Oscar Luis Rodriguez, a founding member of the PRD in Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco, told the local daily El Sol de Tabasco: "[Obrador] has lost credibility. He has lost respect. Here [he] was born, and here he has been buried."

There will be a second tally of the vote Wednesday, standard procedure in Mexico, which could change results, but for most here, the writing is on the wall.

"The PRD's loss in Lopez Obrador's home state clearly undermines his public image and will make some in the party more likely to challenge him on specific issues, says Andrew Selee, director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., "but it is far too early to discount [Obrador] as a significant political force in Mexico."

Some supporters remain hopeful

Indeed many PRD members say the movement will survive. "The movement can't be over because of an election loss; it will prevail because of the reality of inequality in the country," says Juan Vazquez Patilla, the sub-secretary for social movements within the PRD at his family taco stand in Mexico City over the weekend. "Those who say it's now dead are the same people who don't want change."

But specific plans of what Obrador hopes to accomplish as a parallel president remain uncertain, and Mexico City residents out on a Sunday afternoon, say they have no idea what to expect.

Mr. Yañez says Obrador will begin a national tour next month, not "to show muscle," but to inform the country of his plans ahead of November 20, when he is to be inaugurated as the "legitimate" president-elect of the country. That will be his movement's next big test.

Then comes the official inauguration of Calderón on Dec. 1, which PRD members, like Vazquez Patilla, have promised to protest.