Mexican candidate files challenge in presidential vote

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Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), filed a formal challenge Sunday to the officially announced outcome of the July 2 election, charging fraud and other misconduct by the Mexican election authorities as well as the administration of outgoing President Vicente Fox.

The legal challenge follows Saturday's huge demonstration in Mexico City's central square, the Zocalo. Half a million people assembled to protest the designation of Felipe Calderón of the ruling National Action Party (PAN) as the winner of the presidential election. Last week the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) tallied the results from all of Mexico's electoral districts and declared Calderón the victor over López Obrador by a margin of less than 244,000 votes. The winning margin represents 0.58 percent of the 41.7 million votes cast in the election.

In its 836-page filing with the Federal Judicial Electoral Tribunal, the López Obrador campaign documented widespread irregularities in the vote count. In particular, it noted that the Federal Electoral Institute, which runs the elections, recounted ballots at only 2,600 of the 130,000 polling stations, limiting recounts to those stations with irregular tally sheets. This recount of only 2 percent of the ballots slashed Calderón's purported lead from 400,000 to 244,000 votes. López Obrador has demanded a full recount of all the ballots, which he claims will give him the victory.

Evidence of fraud

Other irregularities documented by the López Obrador campaign or reported in the media include:

* Two-and-a-half-million ballots from over 11,000 ballot boxes were not included in the preliminary results released on July 3 because of irregularities such as blank spaces in the tally sheets, unclear penmanship and arithmetic errors.

* Ten ballot boxes were found in a Mexico City dump, mostly from precincts that went to López Obrador. Loose ballots were also found in the same dump. Similar events took place in the 1988 election, widely believed to have been stolen by the then-ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

* Tally sheets sent to the IFE differed in some cases from the tallies attached to the ballot boxes.

When a vote-by-vote count was allowed by the IFE in one district from the state of Veracruz, López Obrador's total increased by several thousand votes.

* A recount in one electoral district in López Obrador's home state, Tabasco, turned up an additional 20,405 votes for him, according to the newspaper *El Universal*.

* There were unusual discrepancies between the number of voters at particular locations and the total votes cast for president or for Congress.

* There were an unusually large number of spoiled and blank ballots, more than 900,000, which poll workers discarded on the grounds that the voter's intention could not be determined.

Eyewitness accounts published in the American press provided examples of pro-Calderón bias in the conduct of the election. A *New York Times* reporter visited Guadalajara, a city under PAN control: "Six ballot boxes were opened for a recount in District 8 because of errors on the tally sheets. In every case, the preliminary tallies turned out to be wrong. In one case, polling workers had miscounted so badly that they gave 100 extra votes to a third candidate, Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and doubled the 235 votes for Mr. Calderón."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported the contrasting conduct of election officials in two Mexico City neighborhoods, one where the vote was pro-Calderón, the other for López Obrador. In the upper-class San Miguel Chapultepec neighborhood, the district electoral board refused six appeals from the PRD to recount ballots. In the poorer Tlalpan district, the electoral board agreed to recount seven boxes and López Obrador gained 310 votes.

Under Mexico's election law, revised after the evident theft of the 1988 presidential election, there is no official winner of the July 2 election until the election court issues its ruling on September 6. The new president will be inaugurated as Fox's successor on December 1.

In addition to the appeal to the electoral tribunal, López Obrador has said he will seek to have the entire election annulled by the Supreme Court, on the grounds of improper intervention by President Fox, who openly campaigned for Calderón in violation of Mexico's election law. PRD officials have also cited the role of Calderón's brother-in-law, Diego Zavala, whose company supplied the software used to review Mexico's voter registration list, which is maintained as a centralized national database rather than administered locally as in the United States.

Ricardo Monreal, a top official of the López Obrador campaign, said that Fox "is the person primarily responsible for creating this 'election of state,'" the phrase commonly used in Mexico to describe PRI-style vote-rigging.

Walking the tightrope

While exercising his right to make a legal challenge to the election results, López Obrador is proceeding with considerable caution in stirring up popular anger over the evidence of ballot fraud and the deeper social and economic issues which underlie the electoral polarization.

This was evident at Saturday's rally in the Zocalo, where the PRD candidate combined sharp verbal attacks on Fox and the election

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authorities with appeals to his own supporters to confine their opposition to peaceful protests that would bring moral and political pressure on the judicial tribunal.

The enormous crowd was heavily working class, with many youth and students as well, chanting, “No to fraud, no to fraud!” and drowning out the speakers at the steps of Mexico’s main cathedral for minutes at a time. One chant indicative of the mood of the crowd was, “If there is no solution, there will be revolution!” Many protesters carried homemade placards and banners denouncing Calderón and President Fox.

López Obrador denounced President Fox, calling him a “traitor to democracy” for unfairly using his office and the institutions of government in Calderón’s favor. He called on his supporters not to allow the country to turn back to the past.

Mexico has a long history of voter manipulation. The most notorious example of fraud in a presidential election occurred in 1988, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) machine resorted to the destruction of ballots and the manipulation of computers to block the opposition candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, and declare Carlos Salinas the winner.

At Saturday’s rally López Obrador called for a National Day of Protest this Wednesday, July 12, to be followed by another mass rally in Mexico City on July 16, two weeks after the presidential vote. But he drew groans from the crowd by telling them not to block highways or engage in other acts of civil disobedience like those employed by the PRD and López Obrador himself during protests against a stolen state election in Tabasco in 1994.

The most significant element in his speech was an appeal to the Mexican Army as “a founding institution and guarantor of our sovereignty” to guard the stored ballots. The military is, in reality, the main guarantor of the interests of Mexico’s moneyed elite and its imperialist backers and the main source of human rights abuses and repression against Mexican workers and peasants.

This appeal was carefully calculated, a signal to the Mexican ruling class and to Washington that if necessary López Obrador, like Fox, would not hesitate to use troops against miners, teachers or other sections of working people. Whatever differences exist between Calderón and López Obrador, between the PAN and the PRD, both are bourgeois parties which defend the basic interests of big business in Mexico.

The role of the United States

Despite these assurances, López Obrador is being denounced by Calderón and the conservative press in Mexico and Latin America for “not playing by the rules” of democracy, a patently anti-democratic attack on a legitimate demand for a recount in such a razor thin election result.

Although under Mexican law Calderón is not the official winner, and will not be at least until September, US President Bush did not delay in calling him and congratulating him on his victory over López Obrador. There is no question that the Bush administration favors Calderón and the PAN. Vicente Fox has become a junior partner of Bush’s energy and border security policies. During his administration, ties have been strengthened between the Mexican officer corps and the US military.

At a June 2005 summit meeting in Waco, Texas, Fox agreed to a so-called “Secure Mexico” policy that makes an amalgam of the war on drugs, the war on terror and the movement of immigrants across the Mexico-US border. The accord, which did not have to be ratified by Mexico’s Congress, also takes steps to further subordinate Mexico’s energy industry to US transnational corporations.

Fox has defended Bush’s decision to send the American National Guard troops the border with Mexico against immigrant workers. He publicly denied that this represented a militarization of the border. Fox and Calderón are also committed to a full implantation of the North American Free Trade Act, including the unrestricted entry of cheap, subsidized US corn and beans into Mexico, which will result in the bankruptcy of many Mexican small farmers.

The US press has been overwhelmingly hostile to López Obrador, treating his mildly “left” criticisms of big business and government by the rich as though they were calls for social revolution. The *Washington Post*, for instance, in its editorial July 8, denounced “Mr. López Obrador’s extravagant (and fanciful) promises to reshape Mexican society.” It warned that the PRD leader “ought not use the power of his oratory, or the adulation of his followers, to nudge the country toward class warfare...”

At the same time, there have been suggestions that, at the age of 52, López Obrador still has a political future if he demonstrates his willingness to bow to the dictates of Washington. There will be another election in 2012, and Calderón cannot succeed himself. Moreover, the deepening crisis of Mexican and world capitalism could well require the services of a demagogue of López Obrador’s evident skill long before the election calendar might seem to permit it.

A more farsighted imperialist observer, the British *Economist* magazine, suggested just before the election that López Obrador’s time might be now, writing: “There are reasons why a switch to the left might be good for Mexico. Mr. Fox and his predecessors have wrongly assumed that what is good for favored individual capitalists is good for capitalism. It is hard to disagree when Mr. López Obrador rails against such privilege, or against the inequity in NAFTA that requires Mexico to allow tariff-free entry to heavily subsidized American maize...

“The real worry, thus, is not that Mr. Fox’s successor will veer too sharply off the established path. It is that he won’t. An overhaul of Congress, the federal system and the police, for starters, and reforms of competition policy, energy, the labor market and taxes would help embed democracy and get the economy moving. In that sense, Mexico needs a radical for president.”

The danger for López Obrador, for the PRD, the PAN, and the Mexican and American capitalist elites is that the class forces awakened in these elections, and on display at the rally Saturday in the Zocalo, cannot be easily demobilized. For the last six years, growing inequality and collapsing living standards have pushed Mexico ever closer to class upheavals and civil war. The electoral crisis could well become the trigger for such a social conflagration.

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