

Election crisis in Mexico deepens as one million protestors demand recount

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18 July 2006

The disputed vote in this month's presidential elections has become the focal point of deep social antagonisms in Mexico. The growing social discontent was on display July 16, when over one million supporters of presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador gathered in Mexico City to demand a full recount and an investigation into charges of election fraud.

The official count of the votes cast on July 2 gave the presidency to Felipe Calderón, the candidate of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), by a margin of less than 244,000 votes, or 0.58 percent.

At the rally, which was the largest protest demonstration in Mexico's history, López Obrador, who ran as the candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), made a brief speech in which he called on his followers to organize to guard the ballot boxes, now stored in 300 locations around the country.

López Obrador reminded his supporters of some of the charges that the PRD has presented to the Elections Tribunal (TEPJF). According to these charges:

* Sixty percent of the ballot boxes were tampered with, resulting in a discrepancy of nearly a million between the number of votes that were reported by the electoral authorities and the numbers attached to the ballot boxes.

* Partial recounts of a few ballot boxes produced results that were at odds with the official tally for those boxes, giving Calderón between 100 and 200 more votes, and López Obrador 100 votes less, per ballot box.

López Obrador rejected what he described as

“legalistic arguments” and challenged Felipe Calderón, his opponent, to agree to the recount.

López Obrador also called on his followers to prepare for acts of civil disobedience. Another mass demonstration will take place on July 30th.

Rules that govern the TEPJF clearly indicate that if there is evidence that any of the above charges are true, a recount is justified. The seven judges of the TEPJF have other options however, including nullifying the results of the contested ballot boxes.

In its appeal to the TEPJF, the PRD has contested 50,000 ballot boxes, but is demanding a recount of all 41.7 million votes. The PAN has contested 500 boxes.

Were the TEPJF only to nullify disputed boxes, it would be statistically very difficult for López Obrador to overcome the 244,000 vote margin that separates him from the PAN candidate.

The TEPJF also has the power to nullify the entire election and call for a new vote if it determines that constitutional principles were “violated in an important manner, placing doubt on the credibility or legitimacy of the vote.”

A second appeal by the PRD charges that the administration of current president Vicente Fox engaged in dirty tricks, including vote-buying and improper campaigning by Fox on Calderón's behalf.

The TEPJF is required to make a decision by the end of August and declare a winner by September 6.

Last week, TEPJF President Leonel Castillo González became a target of the pro-PAN media when he indicated that, in the context of the thin margin of victory for Calderón, “legitimacy is more important than legality.” TEPJF had already been attacked by the media when, in the days leading up to the election, it forced the PAN to withdraw TV commercials that compared López Obrador to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez

and declared him a “danger to Mexico.”

Calderón and the PAN have denounced López Obrador and demanded that the TEPJF not give in to what they call the “blackmail” of protests. Calderón is also accusing López Obrador of wanting an annulment of the vote, rather than simply a recount.

The political crisis in Mexico reflects a deeper social crisis, a product of enormous inequality and deepening misery for millions of Mexican workers. Within this context, López Obrador’s essential function is to keep the discontent of masses of people within legal and establishment channels.

Throughout the elections, López Obrador has sought to walk a political tightrope. On the one hand, he has sought to appeal to the demands of Mexican workers for social programs and jobs and, in the process, has made demagogic attacks on Mexico’s ruling oligarchy. On the other hand, he has sought to assure Mexican and foreign business that as president he would not carry out any policies that would seriously challenge the political and economic domination of the ruling elite.

López Obrador’s basic role has continued into the post-election crisis, a fact that was highlighted in his remarks at the rally, when he sought to argue that a full recount would lead to conditions of financial stability and social harmony. The greatest fear of Mexico’s political elite is that the social discontent that plagues the country will find expression outside the political establishment.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico from the party’s formation after the Mexican Revolution until it was defeated by Fox and the PAN, accepted the announced results of the election even after it was clear that López Obrador and the PRD were going to challenge Calderón’s narrow victory. It is blocking with the PAN in the election dispute.



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