Mexico: Election court rejects Lopez Obrador's demand for full recount

Rafael Azul
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On August 5, Mexico's seven-member Federal Election Tribunal (TEPJF) in a unanimous ruling denied the demand of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the presidential candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), for a full recount of the votes cast in the July 2 election.

The TEPJF ruling criticized the manner in which the elections took place, in part corroborating charges of vote manipulation and fraud, and ordered the recount of 11,839 ballot boxes from 149 districts in 26 of Mexico's 31 States. This amounts to 9 percent of the total of 130,488 ballot boxes. The TEPJF recount will involve about 3.8 million votes.

Thousands took to the streets in Mexico City to protest the TEPJF decision on Saturday. A larger rally took place on Sunday. Lopez Obrador addressed both rallies, calling for the continuation and escalation of demonstrations.

Protests are to be held this week at the offices of the TEPJF to pressure that body to reverse its decision. PRD General Secretary Humberto Acosta called on Lopez Obrador supporters to organize protests wherever the current president, Vicente Fox of the PAN, appears in public.

"If they refuse a full recount, that's proof that we won the presidential election," declared Lopez. At the same time, he discouraged a move by some of his supporters to march on Mexico City's airports.

Behind the mass protests is the frustration of the working class and the poor with 24 years of attacks on wages, jobs and social conditions. A recently released study says that average wages in Mexico are now among the lowest in Latin America, exceeding only those in Honduras, Bolivia and El Salvador. Under those conditions, Lopez Obrador's appeal to the masses is a tactic that involves considerable risk for the Mexican ruling elite, whose interests he ultimately defends.

Up to now, he has managed to channel the mass discontent into peaceful marches and demonstrations and prevent a social explosion combining demands for social and economic justice with the demand for a full recount.

On Monday, the PRD announced that it would participate in, and witness under protest, the limited recount mandated by the TEPJF.

This process is to be completed on August 14. The TEPJF has until the end of August to investigate all the charges brought before it and until September 6 to declare an official winner. It is also empowered to annul the entire election on that day.

The court did not rule out adding additional ballot boxes to the recount, or nullifying some of the results, based on this partial recount. However, it drew the line at counting any ballot box where there was no direct evidence of fraud.

The camp of National Action Party (PAN) candidate Felipe Calderon accepted the TEPJF ruling, which is not expected to affect the result of the vote, though it may narrow Calderon's margin of victory. The PAN denies that there was any fraud.

As it stands now, Calderon is the victor with a margin of 244,000 votes, about 0.6 percent of the total ballots cast.

PAN officials welcomed the court's decision as a means of restoring some credibility to the election. An exchange of e-mails between two PAN politicians, Cesar Nava and Juan Molinar, made public by Lopez Obrador, shows that the PAN was prepared to accept a narrow recount such as that decreed by the TEPJF.

PAN leader German Martinez called on Lopez Obrador to accept the court decision and repeated

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Calderon's offer for a dialogue with the PRD that would lead to some cabinet positions for PRD officials, including for Lopez Obrador himself.

The Institutionalist Revolutionary Party (PRI), the party that ruled Mexico without interruption between 1929 and 2000, called the TEPJf ruling correct and logical. The PRI came in third in the July 2 election, with about 20 percent of the vote.

The social tensions underlying the mass protests in support of Lopez Obrador and demanding a full recount are on the rise. A year of bitter struggles by miners, metal workers, teachers and public employees underscores the highly volatile social and political situation in the country.

There are indications that the current state of affairs will not be tolerated for much longer. An editorial published on August 7 in *Reforma,* a conservative Mexico City daily that supports the PAN and Calderon, describes Lopez Obrador as a skilled politician who is taking advantage of a power vacuum resulting from the United States' preocupation with crises in the Middle East, Venezuela, Afghanistan and North Korea that prevents Washington from intervening more aggressively in the Mexican election dispute on the side of the PAN. Contributing to the power vacuum, according to the newspaper, is the Mexican army's reluctance to get involved in what it considers a purely political dispute. The editorial notes that several days ago, the armed forces rejected feelers from President Fox to step in to restore order.

The article decries the impunity with which the rallies and marches are taking place. It points out that there is no substitute for military repression to restore order.

Similar alarms are being raised in the United States. Despite a campaign by Lopez Obrador to reach out to US and European officials, US newspapers are becoming increasingly critical of the PRD candidate and his tactic of mobilizing popular support.

While the *Houston Chronicle* openly worries about the possibility of violence, the *Washington Post* accuses the PRD candidate of using "ad terrorem" tactics and taking lessons from Joseph Stalin.

The Dallas Mornng News calls Lopez Obrador an egomaniac and declares that the mobilization of masses of people to petition the electoral tribunal "has little to do with democracy."

In Spain, major newspapers are demanding that Lopez Obrador accept the TEPJF's decision. The pro-Socialist Party daily *El País* wrote: "It makes no sense for him to keep his followers mobilized in protests and demonstrations that have the potential for a civil confrontation." Mexico is an important destination for Spanish capital investments.

PRD leaders indicate the Mexican embassy officials in the United States, Spain and other countries are openly lobbying for Calderon. The Bush administration has made no secret of its support for the PAN candidate. President Bush congratulated Calderon for his victory on July 4, two days after the election. Calderon has also been congratulated by Britain's Tony Blair, Germany's Angela Merkel, Canada's Stephen Harper, Spain's Jose Luis Rodriguea Zapatero and Colombia's Alvaro Uribe.

US investors reacted with caution to the electoral court decision. Both the Mexican stock market and the Mexican peso increased slightly on Monday, reflecting expectations that this crisis will be resolved in Calderon's favor.

Bernard Aronson, former undersecretary of state for inter-American affairs and an investment director for the US firm ACON Investments, declared in an interview with the Mexican daily *La Jornada* that while financial markets "clearly favored Calderon" before the election, since then, investors "are conserving their money." He called Lopez Obrador a "step backward for Mexican democracy, though not a fatal one," and warned that world financial markets would react negatively to "the possibility of social struggles and violence."

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