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Calderón emerges as front-runner in Mexican election

By Jeremy Schwartz

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MEXICO CITY — Mexico braced for the first significant test of its young democracy as conservative candidate Felipe Calderón emerged Monday as the likely winner of Sunday's bitterly disputed presidential election and his leftist rival challenged the initial results.

With nearly 98 percent of the ballots counted in preliminary tallying, Calderón had a razor-thin but seemingly insurmountable lead over former Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The mood in Mexico was reminiscent of the 2000 U.S. president election dispute over Florida ballots as officials here said a victor would not be declared until the results could be validated in a review process set to begin Wednesday.

"The only thing I'm sure of is that whoever wins the presidency, half the country will accept him and the other half will repudiate him," said 34-year-old shopkeeper Josefina Franco.

An astonished and exhausted nation awoke Monday without a new president after a day marked by huge voter turnout and a night punctuated by moments of high drama. Both candidates claimed victory late Sunday, and their respective Web sites on Monday presented each as the next Mexican leader.

"All of us Mexicans were hoping to have the name of the winner, but surprise, it didn't go as we thought," said Laura Acevedo, a 39-year-old Mexico City housewife. "The bad part is, we're not very patient and we feel confused."

Preliminary results showed Calderón with a lead of about 400,000 votes, or 36.37 percent of the vote to López Obrador's 35.37 percent.

Calderón, 43, and López Obrador had duelled for months, presenting Mexicans with radically different visions of the future. Calderón, of the National Action Party (PAN), and a former energy secretary in the government of outgoing President Vicente Fox, touted a free trade and free market philosophy and a closer relationship with the United States.

López Obrador, 52, of the Democratic Revolution Party, promised social programs, public works projects and a dramatic shift to the left.

Despite the numbers, López Obrador remained optimistic Monday, saying he would compare official results with his party's estimates, which he claimed gave him a victory of 500,000 votes.

"Have patience," López Obrador told supporters on a morning television news show. "I will always act in a responsible manner. If we lose the election I'll recognize it. If we win the election, even if by one or two votes, I will defend the triumph."

Calderón insisted he had won, and he vowed to build a unifying government.

"It's time to recognize the result," he said. "It's not my victory, it's the victory of the people that voted. What's

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grave is putting in doubt what the people voted yesterday."

Official results won't be ready until the end of the week, possibly Sunday, after the Federal Electoral Institute conducts a detailed verification.

At that point Mexico could be heading for a court fight similar to the drama that gripped the United States in 2000.

Should he lose the official count, López Obrador could ask a judge to order a hand recount. Mexicans vote by marking ballots with black crayons.

Experts were downplaying the possibility of social unrest, but said that depended on how the loser — which Monday appeared to be López Obrador — reacts.

"He's more likely to take it to court than (call supporters into the streets)," said Mexico City political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo. "There may be rallies, but they will probably be peaceful."

It's unlikely López Obrador will give up without a fight. His party's leaders were analyzing the possibility of fraud in Sunday's vote, the Mexico City daily *El Universal* reported.

López Obrador's political reputation is one of dogged determination. He has faced his share of alleged electoral fraud at the hands of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, which ruled Mexico for 71 years until President Vicente Fox's election in 2000.

This time, the PRI's presidential candidate finished a distant third to Calderón and López Obrador, and the party lost its plurality in Congress for the first time since it was formed in 1929, preliminary results indicated.

López Obrador's party still smarts from the belief that it was robbed of the 1988 presidency by suspected election fraud. In the 1990s López Obrador twice led six-week marches from his native Tabasco to Mexico City to protest election results he said were marred by the PRI's dirty tricks.

A gifted politician, López Obrador overcame his opponents last year when Fox's PAN and PRI legislators sought to disqualify him from a presidential race over his role in a land dispute. López Obrador briefly stepped down from his post as Mexico City mayor and toured the country, rallying support for his cause.

In the end Fox's government backed down and López Obrador's popularity in the polls soared.

"He has a tradition as a fighter, but it would also be hard to go against the (Federal Electoral Institute), which has legitimacy now," said Cesar Hernandez, an investigator at the CIDAC policy institute, a nonprofit think tank.

The coming days promise to bring even more election drama for Mexicans, who lived through what one party leader called a "cardiac night." Unlike in the United States, where presidential results are released state by state, in Mexico they are released all at once. Television networks kept running timers counting down to the 8 p.m. release of exit polls and announcers ominously waved envelopes with the results.

When the exit polls were deemed too close to release, the process was repeated three hours later when Luis Ugalde, president of the Federal Election Institute, addressed the nation to release the results of an official quick count of selected regions, thought to be more accurate than exit polls. Instead, Ugalde said the race was too close to call and delayed an official announcement for later in the week.

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