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Mexico Vote Tally Gives Free-Trader A Narrow Victory

Presidential Rival Plans Court Action

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MEXICO CITY, July 6 -- Felipe Calderón, a former energy secretary who promised to boost free trade, narrowly won Mexico's ferociously contested presidential election late Thursday after an all-night count yielded a much-disputed official tally.

Calderón's main opponent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, refused to concede and demanded a recount, and it appeared that the winner of Sunday's balloting would ultimately be decided in court.

The final results showed Calderón with 35.88 percent of the votes, just 200,000 more than López Obrador, a former Mexico City mayor, who collected 35.31 percent. It was the closest presidential election in the country's history.

Even before Mexico's electoral commission released the final tally, López Obrador had demanded a recount and called on his supporters to join him for a rally Saturday in Mexico City's downtown square, the Zocalo.

"We cannot accept the results," he said twice at a packed news conference. "There are many irregularities."

Outside, protesters dressed in bright yellow, the signature color of López Obrador's Democratic Revolutionary Party, chanted: "The Mexican people will rise! No to fraud!"

López Obrador's defiance strikes at Mexico's institutional base. He accused the country's electoral commission, which is widely respected among international experts, of being biased.

At the news conference, López Obrador sliced his right hand through the air, saying Calderón had delivered "a blow" against him by claiming victory.

"No one should be claiming victory today," he said.

López Obrador vowed to challenge the results before Mexico's special elections court, which must decide before Sept. 6 whether to certify the results or order a new election.

Many analysts here said that if Calderón's victory is upheld, he will suffer the effects of a weak mandate. He was backed by barely more than one-third of voters, and would have to work with a sharply divided Congress.

"I'm asking those who didn't vote for me to give me the opportunity to gain their confidence," Calderón said

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Thursday. "I know that I should make mine the desires and the hopes of those who didn't vote for me."

López Obrador's decision to call his supporters into the streets on Saturday had been long anticipated and feared by some because his most impassioned supporters have predicted violence. But López Obrador said Thursday that he would use Saturday's rally solely to lay out his case for a recount, and his aides have said any demonstration will be peaceful.

"If the court and the election institute don't back López Obrador's victory, I'll be the first to say we need a revolution," Elio Luna, the owner of a small nursery, said outside López Obrador's campaign headquarters.

Calderón built his campaign on promises that he would continue the pro-business policies of outgoing President Vicente Fox that have made Fox a favorite of President Bush's administration. He stressed his commitment to free trade, countering the position of López Obrador, who said he would not honor pledges under the North American Free Trade Agreement to lower tariffs on U.S. corn and beans.

Financial markets have seemed to prefer a Calderón victory, driving down prices of Mexican bonds when López Obrador was up in the polls and sending prices back up after Calderón finished first in the preliminary count.

The announcement of Calderón's victory capped five days of seesaw anxiety that began with the largest turnout of voters in Mexican history. López Obrador declared victory on national television just before midnight on Sunday. Within minutes, Calderón made his own televised appearance to do exactly the same.

The dueling announcements set off a crisis that has tested Mexico's transition to a genuine multiparty democracy six years after the end of one-party rule.

Calderón led by one percentage point after preliminary counts. But on Wednesday, Mexico's electoral commission began an official count of tally sheets attached to sealed packets of votes from all 130,000 polling places in the country. López Obrador called for a vote-by-vote count, but Luis Carlos Ugalde, head of the electoral commission, said it was against the law to open any package unless its tally sheet appeared to be altered or damaged.

The early results set off delirium in López Obrador's camp. He clung to a lead of one or two percentage points throughout the afternoon Wednesday and into Thursday. The counting continued in what a Mexico City daily newspaper, *El Universal*, dubbed "The Night Mexico Did Not Sleep."

On Thursday, in the Colonia Caracol neighborhood behind Mexico City's soccer stadium, teams of vote counters battled each other under bare fluorescent lights in one of the country's 300 counting centers. Their final results helped explain why López Obrador's standing had been improving: The populist candidate's total jumped from 110,685 during the preliminary count to 118,246 after the official count, which came after 70 suspicious packets were opened and their ballots counted.

"They added wrong," said Gabino Camacho, López Obrador's bleary-eyed representative in District E-F-23.

But there were not enough districts like Camacho's to swing the election in López Obrador's favor. After all the counting, Calderón's victory margin had declined by only 21,000 votes.

Hours before Camacho finished his cross-checking, Calderón had already pulled ahead, taking a lead he

would not give up. At 4 a.m. Thursday, when Calderón moved ahead of López Obrador for the first time in 20 hours, dozens of his supporters let out a cheer outside his National Action Party headquarters.

Calderón thrust his right hand in the air in a sign of victory. His followers were ruffled, but he emerged looking fresh in a pressed shirt and knotted tie.

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