

Mexico Votes 2006



As President Vicente Fox makes his exit, five candidates vie to take his place.

Partial Vote Recount Ordered In Mexico

Court's Decision a Setback For Populist López Obrador

By Manuel Roig-Franzia
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Mexican presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, center, walks through the streets of downtown Mexico City, in Mexico, on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2006. Obrador toured the protest camps his supporters have set up in Mexico City's center on Wednesday urging them to ignore public criticism as he presses for a recount in a presidential election he says he rightfully won. (Alexandre Meneghini - AP)

MEXICO CITY, Aug. 5 -- In a setback to the presidential hopes of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a special electoral court refused Saturday to order a full recount of votes from the disputed July 2 election -- something his supporters have demanded during a week of sit-ins that have strangled this mega-city's downtown.

The Federal Electoral Judicial Tribunal, a 10-year-old cornerstone of Mexico's democratic transition, instead ordered a more limited recount, starting Wednesday, of ballots cast in just 9 percent of polling places. The unanimous decision sparked angry jeers in tent cities set up by demonstrators on busy thoroughfares and raised fears that a peaceful protest movement could turn violent.

Moments after the court ruled, flatbed trucks heavy with protesters chanting, "Vote by vote, polling place by place" poured into the streets. Demonstrators leaned through the bars of a metal fence surrounding the tribunal's compound and chanted, "Bandits, rats, thieves!" "They're putting at risk the peaceful stability of the country," federal legislator Emilio Serrano screamed into a bullhorn outside the court. "We're prepared to die in the fight."

López Obrador, however, urged tens of thousands of his followers in Mexico City's large downtown square, the Zocalo, to continue peaceful civil resistance.

The tribunal's decision greatly increases the chances of victory for Felipe Calderón, a free-trade booster from the National Action Party of outgoing President Vicente Fox. Top advisers to López Obrador, a populist champion of the poor, said privately that they have almost no chance of overturning the results with such a small recount.

But there is still a possibility that the election saga, which has gripped Mexico for more than a month, could take more twists. Some legal experts believe the tribunal could still annul the election before its Sept. 6 deadline if it finds blatant errors after the limited recount, which is expected to take five days.

The recount will be conducted by Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, an internationally respected body that López Obrador has accused of rigging computers to guarantee Calderón's half-percentage-point victory. The electoral institute's vote counters will be overseen by local judges.

The tribunal agreed to conduct recounts in 149 of Mexico's 300 regional vote tabulation centers. Rather than open sealed vote packets from all 130,400 polling places across the nation, the counters will examine ballots from 11,839.

López Obrador's lawyers may have made a glaring technical error. Tribunal spokesman Alberto Ruiz said the magistrates determined that a full recount was impossible because López Obrador challenged the results from only 174 regional vote tabulation centers. That automatically disqualified from the recount the centers that were not challenged, Ruiz said, as well as 25 centers where the court rejected recount requests.

López Obrador, of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, has slept for the last five nights in a tent on the Zocalo, while torrential rain and scattered snow pelted the area. Since the election, he has convened three huge demonstrations in the square, each larger and louder than the next. Last Sunday, officials in Mexico City said he drew 2 million demonstrators, though many here say that number was greatly inflated by the pro-López Obrador city government.

López Obrador has repeatedly said he would not accept the election results without a full recount. A growing number of political commentators in Mexico are saying that López Obrador has raised enough doubt about the outcome to create a legitimacy problem for Calderón if his victory is upheld.

National Action Party spokesman Herman Martinez said the court's decision Saturday was "correct" and would "give certainty" to the nation. Calderón's lawyers had argued that a full recount was illegal under Mexican law. López Obrador's lawyers had countered that the law allows for full recounts under extraordinary circumstances, such as when widespread fraud patterns and illegal efforts to influence the outcome are found.

The decision was announced just before noon by Chief Magistrate Leonel Castillo, who appeared in a dark suit before a packed chamber in the tribunal's headquarters in southern Mexico City. Few here expected Castillo to announce a full recount. A month before the election, he told Milenio magazine that the court would reject any recount request, a statement that would likely have led to demands for a recusal in a U.S. case.

Court security officers sealed off the compound for nearly an hour after the announcement, preventing journalists, political aides and official observers from leaving because of concerns that protesters might rush in. But despite the angry rhetoric, the demonstrators eventually settled quietly beneath tarps to escape a driving rainstorm.

"It's absurd for them to talk of taking such an extreme, violent position," said Edith Cruz, a 24-year-old law student. Her sister, Mansela Cruz, 21, added: "The movement could get out of control if they don't give us what we want."

The conditions are ripe for an escalation of protests, which have already blocked entrances to Mexico's stock market -- causing a dip in stock prices -- and shackled downtown hotels. In nine days, summer break ends and tens of thousands of college students -- known here for quickly mobilizing aggressive protests -- will be pouring into the city.