

SORE LOSER

The Economist
Aug 10th 2006

People power and its abuses

SHOW me a good loser, goes an old quip, and I'll show you a loser. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador seems to have taken this saying too much to heart. After his apparent defeat in Mexico's presidential election on July 2nd, he is refusing to give up. He has instead called thousands of his supporters into the Zocalo, Mexico City's main square, and Reforma, one of its principal avenues. The (peaceful) protests will continue, he vows, until the electoral authorities agree to a full recount. A fair count, he says, will reverse the result.

Is this another example, like Ukraine's "orange revolution", of a brave democrat mobilising "people power" in order to restore a stolen election? Hardly. Mr Lopez Obrador may have been cheated of victory before. In 1994 he lost the governorship of Tabasco state in an election rigged by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the ever-ruling party of the time. But Mexico has changed. Its democracy is now full-blooded but still new enough that it cannot be taken for granted. Far from strengthening Mexico's young democracy, Mr Lopez Obrador's protest now threatens to undermine it.

July's vote was close. The margin that gave Felipe Calderon of the centre-right National Action Party his apparent victory was a mere 244,000 of the 42m votes cast. But Mr Lopez Obrador's accusations of large-scale fraud are not supported by evidence. Observers from America and the European Union judged the vote fair. In many areas the tally was certified by his own centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution, which scored its best-ever result in the vote for Congress.

The integrity of Mexican elections is the responsibility of two institutions, which have operated transparently and independently of the government since they were reformed in 1996. The Federal Electoral Institute runs elections and counts the votes. The results are

certified by the Federal Electoral Tribunal (Trife), a seven-judge panel that has proved its impartiality in scores of local elections. Mr Lopez Obrador had been happy to accept their authority until he learned

of his likely defeat. On August 5th in a unanimous ruling the Trife judged that there were grounds for a recount at 11,839 polling stations, about 9% of the total. That is unlikely to overturn Mr Calderon's victory, although the Trife could broaden the recount if it finds more irregularities than expected.

That ought to be the last word. The Trife is the final arbiter on electoral matters and must declare a winner (or annul the election) by September 6th. But Mr Lopez Obrador responded to its ruling by inciting

more civil disobedience. "What is going to happen if they force this result on us?" he asked his supporters. "Revolution," they roared in answer.

NO LONGER A FRIEND OF DEMOCRACY

By mobilising people power this way Mr Lopez Obrador is not defending

democracy but attacking the institutions that underwrite it. Many Mexicans fear that he is building a mass movement to make it impossible

for anyone else to govern. But it is far from clear that a majority backs him. Mr Lopez Obrador's fiery five-year tenure as mayor of their capital left Mexicans unsure whether he would govern as a moderniser or

as a reconditioned populist. His performance since the election, especially his willingness to let Mexican democracy erode, suggests the latter. The longer he camps out in the Zocalo, the more apparent it will be that he does not deserve to be president, after this or any future election.

See this article with graphics and related items at

http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_SN_SSDTP

Go to <http://www.economist.com> for more global news, views and analysis from the Economist Group.