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PAN Candidate Calderon Narrowly Wins Presidency; PRD Challenges Results

by LADB Staff

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The final outcome of the July 2 Mexican presidential election remains uncertain even though the federal electoral agency (Insituto Federal Electoral, IFE) declared Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) the victor. Both the preliminary results released during the course of the election (Programa de Resultados Electorales Preliminares, PREP) and the official numbers published on July 5 showed that Calderon won by a razor-thin margin.

The IFE's final tally showed Calderon with 35.88% of the vote, compared with 35.31% for Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) came in a distant third with 22.26% of the vote. The remaining votes went to Patricia Mercado Castro of the Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata y Campesina (PASC) with 2.7% and Roberto Campa Cifiran of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) with 0.96%.

In absolute numbers, Calderon took more than 14.98 million votes, compared with slightly more than 14.74 million for Lopez Obrador, a difference of about 236,000 votes. Lopez Obrador who ran as the candidate for the Coalicion por El Bien de Todos that included his own party, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) said there were enough irregularities in the election to challenge the final result. Lopez Obrador's campaign staff also suggested that the IFE might have manipulated the figures to favor Calderon.

Lopez Obrador brings case to electoral court

On July 8, Lopez Obrador called a massive rally at the huge Zocalo central square in Mexico City to announce that he was appealing the IFE results to the federal electoral court (Tribunal Federal Electoral, TRIFE). The PRD compiled a 900-page document containing the allegations of irregularities. "The electoral process has not ended," Lopez Obrador told the crowd, estimated at about 150,000. "The evaluation of this election is just beginning. We are going to defend our victory." PAN officials said they have put together their own legal team to answer the complaints brought by the PRD to the TRIFE. "We have 1,000 lawyers working on the case so we can respond in a proper and legal manner," said PAN secretary-general Cesar Nava.

The TRIFE has until Aug. 31 to rule on any electoral disputes. The tribunal will either announce a winner on Sept. 6 or invalidate the election. However, the Lopez Obrador camp is not stopping at the electoral court. The PRD candidate has already said he would bring the case to Mexico's highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN), arguing that President Vicente Fox violated the Mexican Constitution through direct and indirect advocacy on behalf of Calderon.

Political observer Kelly Arthur Garrett, who writes a column for the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald, said the PRD's decision to question the participation of the Fox

government in the election might be a strategy to have the election annulled. "Campaign law violations, even if proven, would not be remedied by a full or even a partial recount," said Garrett. Several politicians and analysts, including former IFE president Jose Woldenberg and even PAN Sen. Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, defended the PRD's right to bring the election results to the TRIFE. "If a political party or a coalition feels it has been wronged, it has every right to bring its arguments before the federal electoral tribunal," said Woldenberg.

PRD officials said they were prepared to explore all avenues to prove that the election was stolen from Lopez Obrador. "This is going to take a long, long time," said Manuel Camacho Solis, a top adviser to the PRD candidate. "Our perception is that there have been very important irregularities."

PRD accuses federal government of orchestrating fraud

Many of Lopez Obrador's supporters attempted to draw parallels to the 1988 presidential election, when the PRI allegedly stole the election from PRD candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. In that election, Cardenas was ahead when a mysterious "computer glitch" stopped the vote count. PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari surged ahead after the count was resumed. Salinas was declared the winner in that election with slightly more than 50% of the vote, compared with 30% for Cardenas and 17% for Manuel Clouthier of the PAN.

On July 10, Lopez Obrador produced a videotape, which he said provided evidence that fraud was also committed in this year's election. In the videotape, a poll worker in Guanajuato is seen stuffing ballots in a box. Rather than using voting machines, electoral authorities use paper ballots, on which voters mark a large "X" next to their choices. The results are tabulated at voting centers and transmitted to the IFE, which then totals the tally sheets. "This is old-style fraud," said Lopez Obrador, contending that similar instances of fraud had taken place across the country. "I am certain the people are not going to permit this abuse," he added, repeating his demand for a nationwide, vote-by-vote recount.

IFE officials said the Lopez Obrador campaign misconstrued the scenes in the videotape, which they said showed the poll worker transferring a handful of ballots that were mistakenly deposited in the box for the presidential election. "The supervisor of that particular polling location discovered between eight and 10 ballots for the congressional race in the box for the presidential race," said the IFE. "The supervisor moved the ballots to their proper box in the presence of electoral officials and representatives from all the parties."

The PAN denounced the release of the videotape as another dirty campaign tactic by the PRD. "This is just noise making," Nava told a news conference. "[The PRD] is trying to throw the election into the trash can."

Electoral institute denies PRD claims of bias

The IFE denied the PRD claims that it had been biased toward Calderon, although the institute did acknowledge some mistakes in explaining to the public certain inconsistencies between the PREP numbers and the final count. In particular, the IFE delayed explaining why 3 million ballots that were set aside for closer scrutiny were not included in the PREP figures that were released.

The difference between Calderon and Lopez Obrador changed very little when those ballots were included in the final count. There was also criticism about the way in which the PREP figures were released, showing Calderon ahead most of the evening.

"If PAN candidate Calderon was on top the whole time according to the PREP data, this was because of the way the results arrived at the institute's computation center," said IFE spokesperson Rene Miranda, adding that data from big cities and northern states where the PAN is strong came in faster than results from rural, southern states that voted for Lopez Obrador.

Despite the glitches, the IFE said the electoral process went as well as could have been expected, given the extremely tight race. "These were clean and exemplary elections," said IFE president Luis Carlos Ugalde. "Certain things have come up as issues because of the tight margin." Some private analysts agreed that the IFE managed the election well. "[The IFE's] technical work is above question," said Gabriel Guerra Castellanos, founder of the political analysis organization Guerra Castellanos y Asociados. "Its communication with the public and political parties, however, leaves much to be desired."

Foreign observers from the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU), and other entities also backed the IFE contention that no major fraud took place in the Mexican elections. "I rule out any fraud, not only because of the trustworthiness and competence of the authorities responsible for the electoral process but because every major party had many observers at each polling site," said Jose Ignacio Salafranca, head of the EU observer delegation. Nguyen Dong, who led a UN observer delegation, agreed with Salafranca that the presence of a large number of PRD observers at each polling site eliminated the possibility of any massive fraud. "If the PRD claims that there was manipulation, then we have to assume that the representatives of all the other parties present at the polling site were accomplices," said Dong.

Lopez Obrador responded to these comments by suggesting that some PRD observers may have received bribes. This prompted an angry response from a PRD leader in Guerrero state, one location where the alleged bribes were said to have occurred. "We have good people, and I no way distrust my colleagues who acted as representatives of our party at the polls during the election," said state party leader Sebastian de la Rosa. Vote-by-vote recount endorsed

Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Global Exchange, while also dismissing massive fraud, said enough uncertainties existed regarding the election that a vote-by-vote recount should take place. "In light of the uncertainty and confusion generated by the presidential election...electoral authorities are obligated to respond with measures that will give certainty [to the results] and dissipate even the smallest doubts," said Ted Lewis, who led that organization's delegation of observers.

Dong also supported a vote-by-vote recount. "This is [Lopez Obrador's] most convincing and reasonable argument," said the UN representative. The bitter dispute regarding the election results reflects the negative tone of the campaign. Calderon, who at one time was 10 percentage points behind Lopez Obrador, quickly rose in the polls by labeling his PRD rival as a "danger"

to Mexico. Some observers suggest Lopez Obrador could have easily refuted those charges if he had participated in the first presidential debate in late April rather than remain on the sidelines (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03). A month before the election, polls showed the two candidates in an extremely tight race (see SourceMex, 2006-06-07).

Lopez Obrador took a small lead in some polls just after the second presidential debate in early June by taking out advertisements suggesting that Calderon's brother-in-law may have received favorable treatment when the PAN candidate was energy secretary (see SourceMex, 2006-06-21).

Turnout higher than expected

Many analysts had expected the bitter tone of the presidential campaign to keep many voters away from the polls, but the opposite happened. IFE statistics showed that almost 48.8 million voters participated in the election, the largest number in Mexican history. While the percentage of participation was similar to the 2000 election, at about 60%, the voter rolls have expanded significantly since 2000.

The largest turnout occurred in states where the PRD and the PAN were strongest. About 68% of voters participated in the PRD stronghold of Mexico City and in Tabasco state, home of both the PRD and the PRI candidates. Lopez Obrador beat Madrazo handily in Tabasco. Voter turnout surpassed 60% in Nuevo Leon, Queretaro, Morelos, Jalisco, and Yucatan, states where the PAN has a fairly strong base.

Some analysts said the strong turnout spoke well for the Mexican electorate, who went to the polls despite the dirty campaigns waged by both the PAN and the PRD. "Mexicans went to the polls because they thought it was important that they participate, because they knew that there was a lot at play in this election," said Denise Dresser, a political analyst at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). The election appeared to expand the political power of both the PAN and the PRD at the expense of the PRI (see other article in this issue of SourceMex).

In general terms, some analysts said, a large share of the middle class and the wealthy voted for Calderon while the poor mostly went for Lopez Obrador, although Madrazo probably managed to get some of the low-income voters. "I welcome this political plurality," said Woldenberg. "Our problem now is social cohesion, because we are now experiencing a polarization between the haves and the have-nots. We have to look for ways for the country to come together." The IFE also reported that Calderon won 58% of the votes cast by expatriates, compared with 34% for Lopez Obrador and 4% for Madrazo. Slightly more than 19,000 expatriates participated in the election, said the institute. (Sources: La Jornada del Oriente, 07/05/06; The Christian Science Monitor, 07/05/06, 07/06/05; Notimex, 07/05/06, 07/07/06; Copley News Service, 07/05/06, 07/07/06, 07/09/06; The Chicago Tribune, 07/05-07/06, 07/09/06; Reforma, 07/03-06/06, 07/09/06, 07/10/06; Associated Press, 07/04/06, 07/06/06, 07/06/06, 07/10/06; El Economista, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, 07/04-07/06, 07/10/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, Spanish news service EFE, 07/10/06; Bloomberg News Service, 07/06/06, 07/07/06, 07/10/06; Milenio Diario, 07/03/06, 07/05-07/06, 07/10/06, 07/11/06; Reuters, 07/03-06/06, 07/10/06, 07/11/06; El Universal, The New York Times, 07/03-07/06, 07/09-11/06; La Jornada, 07/04-07/06, 07/10/06, 07/11/06; The Herald-Mexico City, Excelsior, La Crisis, 07/05-07/06, 07/10/06, 07/11/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/05/06, 07/07/06, 07/10/06, 07/11/06)

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