



## CLOSE ELECTION TESTS MEXICO'S DEMOCRACY

July 10, 2006

*This month's presidential election in Mexico, fought over issues of poverty and Mexico's relationship with the United States, is facing court challenges reminiscent of the 2000 U.S. presidential election.*

Felipe Calderon, a conservative candidate from the ruling party, eked out a victory against leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico's July 2 elections.

They were separated by just 236,000 votes out of more than 41 million votes cast.

But Lopez Obrador has refused to accept defeat and has filed a legal challenge.

### **Mexican electoral process**

The agency that ran the election, the Federal Electoral Institute, has declared Calderon the winner.

Next, the Federal Electoral Tribunal, known by its Spanish acronym TRIFE, has until Sept. 6 to validate the election. If it doesn't declare a winner, it must order a new election.

"The tribunal is basically the highest court in Mexico on electoral affairs. They're the last word," explained Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Center For Strategic and International Studies, on the July 6 NewsHour.

The seven-member tribunal will hear all legal challenges to the election, including those filed this week by Lopez Obrador demanding a vote-by-vote recount of the election in all of Mexico's 300 electoral districts.

Analysts are comparing the Mexican election to the U.S. presidential election of 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court halted a vote recount in Florida. That decision led to Republican George W. Bush's victory over Democrat Al Gore.

But some say the Mexican system is better prepared.

"You look at the Florida Supreme Court or the U.S. Supreme Court -- elections are not their specialty, and it took them time to get up to speed," Ray Kennedy, an elections expert in Mexico who trains electoral workers internationally for the United Nations, told The Miami Herald.

"You don't have that here. You have a body that specializes in one thing."

### **Very different visions for Mexico**

If declared the winner, Calderon will face an uphill battle to control the direction of his country. He has only one-third of the popular vote and has a sharply divided Congress, The Washington Post reported.

The 43-year-old Calderon has promised to continue the policies of outgoing President Vicente Fox, who is a member of his National Action Party.

Calderon supports free trade -- without tariffs or barriers between trading partners.

His support comes primarily from middle-class urbanites and business classes in the northern part of Mexico.

His opponent Lopez Obrador, on the other hand, has the support of poor rural Mexicans, primarily in the southern part of the country.

Lopez Obrador is former mayor of the country's largest city, Mexico City, and campaigned against free trade, promising to create programs to help the poor.

### **A fledgling democracy**

Regardless of the ultimate outcome, many political analysts feel this election is a step forward for Mexico, which, until 2000, was ruled by the same party for 71 years.

"This election was a success because the level of debate among Mexicans about which platform they preferred is a success. I think it's been a success for the political country -- the political culture of this country. I think it's been a success for the institutions," Peschard-Sverdrup said.

Others think success can only be determined when the electoral process is complete and the institutions have been tested.

"I think it's too soon to tell. We need to see the Mexican people come together. And a lot is going to depend on the electoral court and its ability to establish an outcome that is not only formally legal, but also seen as legitimate in the eyes of the losers, as well as the winners," Jonathan Fox, professor of Latin American and Latino studies at the University of California in Santa Cruz, told the NewsHour on July 6.

*--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions