

Mexican candidates battle in TV debate

MIAMI HERALD
JUN. 07, 2006

MEXICO CITY - The front-runners in Mexico's tight presidential race tried to break ahead Tuesday in the second and final televised debate before elections, trading personal jabs and promising to bring jobs to Mexico so that millions won't have to seek better lives in the United States.

Known for his fiery and off-the-cuff remarks, leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador remained almost timid in the face of repeated attacks by conservative Felipe Calderon of President Vicente Fox's National Action Party. But he closed the debate by accusing Calderon's brother-in-law of getting contracts in the energy sector while Calderon served as energy secretary under Fox.

"My proposal is for three things: Not to lie. Not to rob. Not to betray the people," he said.

Calderon denied Lopez Obrador's accusation, saying: "You aren't going to win with lies."

Calderon and Lopez Obrador are running neck-and-neck ahead of the July 2 vote, and analysts have said the debate could help decide the next president.

All five candidates taking part in the debate talked of creating jobs to staunch the flow of migrants north, and Lopez Obrador promised to fight U.S. immigration proposals that call for sending troops to the border and extending fences.

"We have to convince them that walls, militarization of the border and heavy-handed threats are not the answer," he said.

Appearing confident and authoritative, Calderon promised a "heavy hand" against criminals, saying he would clean up corrupt police and enforce a rule of law that is often lacking in Mexico. He took his first indirect swipe at Lopez Obrador in his

opening statement, telling voters: "You can decide between those who want the unity of Mexicans, and those who sow hate and division."

He later attacked Lopez Obrador's proposals, which include pensions for the elderly, as irresponsible.

"The true danger is that he is proposing exorbitant government spending that will cause inflation, devaluations, economic crisis and bankrupt the country," he said.

Calderon argued that under Lopez Obrador's leadership, Mexico City became the national leader in both crime and corruption.

Lopez Obrador responded calmly, saying that if that were true, "I wouldn't have this level of approval in Mexico City," his power base. He urged voters to give his party its first chance at the presidency. "We have to give a hand to those left behind," he said.

Lopez Obrador also attacked Fox for feuding with anti-American Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and what he described as bowing to Washington. "I won't be a puppet of any foreign power," he said.

Roberto Madrazo, running third in the polls and fighting an uphill battle to bring his Institutional Revolutionary Party back to the presidency, said he offered an alternative to the increasing polarization of Mexico.

"People are scared of what could happen during the election," he said. "Neither the radical and conflictive left nor the intolerant and repressive right have the answers."

The debate didn't appear to have a clear winner. Most eyes were on Calderon and Lopez Obrador, both of whom have been airing hard-hitting negative ads and exchanging barbs for months in their fight for the government's top job.

The silver-haired Lopez Obrador led polls for two years until a debate in April, which he chose not to attend, saying he preferred to speak face-to-face with voters.

The decision cost him. In his absence, Calderon was widely seen as the winner against Madrazo.

Lopez Obrador has claimed Fox illegally boosted government spending to keep his party's hold on the presidency, a charge Fox has denied. Such practices are particularly sensitive in Mexico, where the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party used government largesse to hold power for 71 years until Fox's victory in 2000.

Hours before the debate, a Mexico City shooting heightened pre-election tensions. The wife of jailed businessman Carlos Ahumada said gunmen shot at her car hours before she was to release videos expected to be damaging to Lopez Obrador. No one was injured.

In March 2004, Ahumada, a Mexico City construction mogul, rocked the country when he was shown in videos giving a suitcase holding thousands of U.S. dollars to a political ally of Lopez Obrador. The former Mexico City mayor has denied any connection.