

Mexico election could put leftist on US doorstep

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MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Uneasy at election victories by leftists in Latin America, the United States may soon feel the region's wave of change lapping up against its southern border if a former indigenous welfare officer wins Mexico's presidential election on July 2.

"At stake is the future course of America's influential southern neighbor at a time when Mexico and the U.S. wrangle over border security and immigration issues, and as other Latin American nations turn to left-leaning leaders," U.S. opinion pollster John Zogby said.

Leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is slightly ahead in opinion polls but concerns in Washington that he may join an anti-U.S. axis led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez if he becomes president are unfounded, aides say.

"He is focused primarily on Mexico. He has no plans to seek alliances with other countries to try to confront the U.S. empire," said Ricardo Monreal, a senior aide to the leftist.

Chavez is the most vocal U.S. foe in Latin America and is allied with Bolivian President Evo Morales and Cuban President Fidel Castro.

Lopez Obrador has rarely traveled abroad and has little interest in foreign affairs. He would devote his six-year term to the huge task of narrowing Mexico's income gap and raising millions out of poverty, Monreal said.

Rather than looking to Latin American revolutionaries like Che Guevara, Lopez Obrador lists Mexican reformers from the 19th and 20th centuries as role models and admires moderate Chilean President Michelle Bachelet.

There is little room for ideological clashes between Mexico and the United States, analysts say.

Just as Washington needs Mexico's help in securing the border against illegal immigrants and possible terrorist infiltration, Mexico's economy relies on the United States, a partner in the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA.

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Lopez Obrador, once an Indian welfare official in his native Tabasco state, is aware of that, said former ambassador Andres Rozental, of the Mexican Council on Foreign Affairs.

"He's not going to be gratuitously aggressive. He's not going to be openly anti-American, no president of Mexico at this stage, with NAFTA, could afford to be," he said.

Mexico cooperated closely with the United States on border security and drug trafficking under outgoing President Vicente Fox, although it did oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

A narrow majority of opinion polls in the last week give Lopez Obrador a lead but some, including Zogby International, put Fox's former energy minister Calderon ahead.

Calderon is a pro-business conservative favored by Washington, although he has criticized plans in the U.S. Congress to put a security fence along hundreds of miles of the border to curb illegal immigrants.

"Obviously, the United States would be more comfortable with Calderon because he is going to be much more predictable and he also is more in tune with the U.S. model for the Mexican economy but at the same time the United States is more than willing to work with Lopez Obrador," said Pamela Starr of Eurasia Group consultants in New York.

Although he has said he wants good relations with the United States, Lopez Obrador has a tendency toward fierce rhetoric that reminds opponents of Chavez.

He warned last month he would not be "a puppet, a plaything" of the United States and has said frequently that he would block tariff-free U.S. corn and bean imports due to come into force in 2008.

"You see some worrying demagogic tendencies in Lopez Obrador that you don't see in Calderon," said Gordon Hanson of the University of California, San Diego.