

Mercado looks for liberal votes in Mexico

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MEXICO CITY - She supports same-sex marriages and decriminalizing abortion, and admits to smoking pot one time - and inhaling. The chances are next to nil that plainspoken feminist Patricia Mercado, Mexico's most liberal presidential candidate, will win election. But some say she may ruin the main leftist Democratic Revolution Party's best shot at the presidency.

Less than two weeks before the July 2 election, Democratic Revolution's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is running even for the lead with conservative Felipe Calderon of the National Action Party. Polls show some 12 percent of the 71.6 million voters are undecided.

Analysts and pollsters say Mercado's Social-Democratic and Rural Alternative Party will win over those leftists who feel Lopez Obrador is not liberal enough.

At a rally Sunday, she said Democratic Revolution "has remained behind and its platform has not grown, while Alternative represents a progressive platform."

Lopez Obrador's campaign manager, Jesus Ortega, said he is not worried. And even Mercado, who is in fourth place out of five candidates, said she is just trying to get the 2 percent of the vote needed to keep her tiny party registered to compete in future elections.

She has launched a no-frills campaign, traveling by bus to universities across the country, often dressed in a business suit to complement her soccer-mom haircut.

"She's closer to the left's position than the disguised leftist position of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador," said Ingrid Novoa, 24, an employee at Mexico's Supreme Court. "Lopez Obrador only supports the poor. He's very divisive, and Mercado, on the other hand, is super-inclusive, tolerant. She's not just after power. Maybe she's far from reaching the presidency, but she's more authentic."

Mercado demonstrated her commitment to decriminalizing marijuana by attending a May rally in Mexico City of puffing pot smokers.

Earlier, she told reporters she had tried smoking pot one time and fell asleep. She said she did not like it and never did it again.

Lopez Obrador has been more cautious. He has alienated some liberals by refusing to take a stand on abortion and gay marriage - issues that could cost him in this predominantly Roman Catholic nation. Abortion rights activists have dogged him at rallies, holding placards asking "What about abortion?"

He says the legalization of abortion and same-sex marriages should be submitted to a public referendum.

"A savior doesn't offend Cardinals," said George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, referring to Lopez Obrador who has painted himself as 'the savior' of Mexico's poor. "He hasn't wanted to alienate the Church. He knows the country is deeply religious."

Even further to the left, Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos has called Lopez Obrador a false leftist who would lead an "administration of handouts," referring to plans that include giving all of the elderly government pensions.

Though Marcos is not running, his criticism could turn voters away from Lopez Obrador.

Mercado's campaign manager, Gustavo Gordillo, said his candidate might also rob votes from the conservative ruling National Action Party because Mercado appeals to young people who support National Action's free-market policies but disagree with its conservative stance on abortion and other social issues.

"We're going to be the real surprise," he said.

Even so, Grayson said Mercado's supporters may abandon her on July 2 given the tight race. She's already lost first-time voter Alejandro Gomez, 20, a Mexico City law student.

"If she wasn't so far back in the polls, I would go with Patricia Mercado. But to ensure my vote counts, I'm going to vote for Lopez Obrador," Gomez said.