

Mexico leftist seeks to calm nerves, leads poll

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MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador told Mexico's business sector on Tuesday he was not an enemy as he tried to calm nerves ahead of a July 2 presidential election that is balanced on a knife edge.

Mexico's rich fear Lopez Obrador would target them and ruin the economy with populist policies but he has been conciliatory in recent days after more than five months of campaigning marred by mutual attacks.

"I am not against businessmen. I can't be against people who invest and create jobs," the leftist said in an interview on Mexico's main breakfast news show.

Lopez Obrador gave a similar message on Monday night in the conservative bastion of Monterrey, a northern city near Texas that is home to some of Mexico's biggest companies like cement maker Cemex.

"There can be no fiscal deficit and we are not going to load the country with debt," he told a rally there. "Trust me that we are also not going to spark inflation," he said.

An opinion poll in Excelsior newspaper put the leftist former mayor of Mexico City ahead of bitter rival and ruling party candidate Felipe Calderon, a conservative, by four points.

A narrow majority of surveys in the last week give Lopez Obrador a similar lead but some, including respected U.S. pollsters Zogby International, put Calderon ahead, although with a narrowing lead.

Pollster John Zogby acknowledged that nothing was set in stone as oil-rich Mexico chooses a successor to conservative President Vicente Fox, who cannot run for a second term.

"ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN"

"There are 10 days to go, and this is Mexico -- anything can happen between now and election day, and anything can happen on election day itself," he said on his company's Web site.

The two leading candidates have indulged in fierce rounds of mud-slinging in recent weeks, and foreign investors worry that Lopez Obrador, who has a long history of organizing protests, will refuse to accept a tight result.

But a top aide said on Monday night the leftist would not incite street trouble if he lost the election by fraud.

"We will not shut down or occupy offices, cause chaos or problems," political adviser Ricardo Monreal told Reuters. "We will go to the courts."

Some businessmen worry Lopez Obrador would instigate radical social change in the mold of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a concern played up in attack ads run by Calderon likening his opponent to the fiery South American populist.

Lopez Obrador, who wants to introduce a social safety net with pensions and subsidies for millions of poor Mexicans, rejects the comparison outright.

He said plans like subsidies on electricity and fuel for the poor and a pension scheme for the elderly would be funded by cutting corruption, tax evasion and government salaries.

"Mexico is one of the countries with the worst tax evasion in the world, we only collect 50 percent of what we should gather," he told broadcaster Televisa on Tuesday. "If we stop this there is no need for higher taxes or new taxes."

A bank report predicted a government run by Lopez Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD, would be more akin to moderate administrations like that of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

"Clearly, the business community would much prefer a Calderon victory on July 2," Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein analyst Neil Dougall said in a report.

"However, we also believe that the markets would soon come round to the view that a PRD presidency would imply the kind of fiscally conservative policies practiced by moderate left-of-centre governments elsewhere in the region."