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Wednesday June 7, 04:00 PM



Conservative tears into leftist in Mexico debate

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Mexican conservative presidential candidate Felipe Calderon tore into his leftist rival live on television on Tuesday in a nasty campaign for the July 2 election that was further unsettled by a gun attack.

In a televised debate seen as crucial for swaying undecided voters, Calderon several times accused leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of lying and threatening Mexico's stability with his plans to give priority to the poor.

"The project you represent is a danger for Mexico because of the threat of debt and economic crisis," Calderon said, warning of "inflation, devaluations, economic crisis and another bankruptcy of the country."

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Calderon and Lopez Obrador run neck and neck in opinion polls, well ahead of the three other candidates who also took part in the debate.

Lopez Obrador, the often irascible former mayor of Mexico City, kept his cool and avoided responding directly to the attacks in the first head-to-head encounter between the two after months of aggressive ads in the media.

Speaking in a sometimes hesitant, low voice, he promised to play tough with Washington and push it to give Mexican immigrants more rights.

"The next Mexican president is not going to be the plaything of any foreign government. We are going to have a relationship of mutual respect with the U.S. government," he said.

The United States is grappling with immigration reforms and President George W. Bush

Wellington

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said on Tuesday that lawmakers must pass a comprehensive new law coupling tighter border security with a path to eventual citizenship for millions of illegal immigrants.

COUNTRY DIVIDED

An opinion poll in *El Universal* daily on Tuesday put Lopez Obrador, from the Party of the Democratic Revolution, and former energy minister Calderon of the ruling National Action Party, in a dead heat at 36 percent of support.

Other surveys in recent days also have the rivals close.

President Vicente Fox, an ally of Calderon, opened Mexico to full democracy when he ended 71 years of one-party rule at the last presidential election in 2000.

In a sign of how divided Mexico now is, online newspaper readers judged the conservative the winner of the debate, while the street belonged to the leftist.

Around 10,000 people, some letting off fireworks, watched the event on a big screen in the capital's huge Zocalo square.

"Who won the debate?" shouted a man with a megaphone. "Obrador, Obrador, Obrador," the crowd replied.

But an online poll by the leading *Reforma* newspaper, which Lopez Obrador accuses of being biased against him, gave victory to Calderon and put the leftist in last place of the five candidates who took part.

The mood was unsettled on Tuesday when unknown gunmen shot at the family of a businessman who was at the center of a corruption scandal in 2004 that hurt Lopez Obrador.

No one was wounded in the attack on a car carrying the wife and three children of Carlos Ahumada, an Argentine filmed giving bundles of money to Lopez Obrador's main ally in the City Council over two years ago.

In the debate, Calderon said ads by Lopez Obrador's campaign that showed the conservative backing a controversial bailout of crisis-hit banks a decade ago were untrue.

"You are lying, Mr. Lopez Obrador," he said. Calderon accused Lopez Obrador of ruining Mexico City in his 4-1/2 years as mayor.

"You are not going to win because people are suffering from your failure in Mexico City against crime, corruption and unemployment which you haven't even answered for here," he said.

A political analyst said Lopez Obrador's tactic of avoiding conflict and quietly stressing his plans to end privileges for Mexico's rich may have been the right one.

"Of the leading candidates he was the one who handled the situation best. He was much more confident, more affable. He didn't get involved in disputes." said political scientist Juan Pablo Cordoba.

(Additional reporting by Miguel Angel Gutierrez, Greg Brosnan, Catherine Bremer and Chris Aspin)

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