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May 17, 6:12 AM EDT

Mexico Voters Fear Nation on Edge of Chaos

By JULIE WATSON
Associated Press Writer

MEXICO CITY (AP) -- Police enraged by the kidnapping of six officers club unarmed detainees. A bloody battle between steelworkers and police leaves two miners dead. Drug lords post the heads of decapitated police on a fence to show who's in charge.

Less than two months before Mexicans elect their next president, many fear the country is teetering on the edge of chaos - a perception that could hurt the ruling National Action Party's chances of keeping the presidency and benefit Mexico's once-powerful Institutional Revolutionary Party, whose candidate has been trailing badly.

Some blame President Vicente Fox for a weak government. Others say rivals are instigating the violence to create that impression, hoping to hurt National Action candidate Felipe Calderon, who has a slight lead in recent polls.

A poll published Friday in Excelsior newspaper found 50 percent of respondents feared the government was on the brink of losing control. The polling company Parametria conducted face-to-face interviews at 1,000 homes across Mexico. The poll had a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

The conflicts are "a warning sign," said Yamel Nares, Parametria's research director.

Security is the top concern for Mexicans, and Fox has struggled to reform Mexico's notoriously corrupt police. Meanwhile, drug-related bloodshed has accelerated, with some cities seeing killings almost daily.

In April, suspected drug lords posted the heads of two police officers on a wall outside a government building where four drug traffickers died in a Jan. 27 shootout with officers in the Pacific resort of Acapulco.



AP Photo/EDUARDO VERDUGO

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A sign nearby read: "So that you learn to respect."

Last week, Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos said Mexico was in a "state of rage," and warned that tensions were similar to those that preceded the Zapatistas' brief armed uprising in January 1994 in the southern state of Chiapas.

He said his group is committed to peace, but many fear his increased public profile - after years of hiding out in the jungle - could foreshadow greater polarization among Mexican voters.

The masked leader said a May 3 clash that left a teenager dead and scores injured in San Salvador Atenco, 15 miles northeast of Mexico City, is an example of the growing tensions.

Marcos has been leading nearly daily demonstrations in the town following the incident, which began when a radical group of townspeople kidnapped and beat six policemen in a dispute over unlicensed flower vendors. Police responded with rage the next day. Television crews captured officers repeatedly beating unarmed protesters, and several detained women alleged officers raped them.

The clash followed another bloody battle between steelworkers and police trying to break up an illegal strike at a plant in Lazaro Cardenas last month. Unions later threatened to shut down the country.

George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary, said the violence reflects Fox's lack of leadership.

"The state has become much weaker under his watch," Grayson said.

Recent polls show Calderon has overtaken longtime presidential front-runner Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, whom opponents have portrayed as a leftist demagogue similar to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

But that could change if PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo can convince voters that Mexico was more stable under his party's 71-year reign, which ended with Fox's victory in 2000. Mexican law bars presidents from seeking re-election.

Madrazo has tried to paint himself as the law-and-order candidate - though so far his poll numbers have remained well behind those of Calderon and Lopez Obrador.

"It's not going to help Lopez Obrador who has been associated with the rabble rousers, but Madrazo can come out and say with his party at least Mexico had continued stability," Grayson said.

Gerardo Aranda, a tourism guide in Mexico City, said he won't go back to the PRI, but he doesn't know who he will vote for.

"No one really knows now what could happen next," he said. "All the



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candidates are bad. ... There is so much anger toward the government, everyone is against everything."

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