



Latin America Continues March to the Left

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Washington
27 March 2006

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Mexican presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador greets supporters as he arrives to a campaign rally in Tijuana (File photo - Jan. 26, 2006)

Recent public opinion polls taken in Mexico and Peru show left-leaning candidates leading as presidential elections approach in the two countries. The current front-runners are in position to replace two close U.S. allies.

A recent Mexican public opinion poll shows leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador leading a field of presidential candidates, as the July 2 presidential election approaches. Some 42 percent of respondents supported Lopez Obrador, placing him ahead of ruling party candidate Felipe Calderon with 32 percent and Roberto Madrazo with 24 percent.

support from Mexico's business elite, offering protection for industry.

Critics of the former Mexico City mayor have branded him a populist for what they describe as handout programs during his tenure, but Lopez Obrador has also sought

Director of the University of New Haven's Center for International Industry Competitiveness George Haley told VOA Lopez Obrador would likely continue in the economic footsteps of his predecessors, including current President Vicente Fox, a U.S. ally.

"Obrador isn't a fire-breathing radical. Mexico has had substantial economic improvement or economic enhancement and job creation under the policies of the most recent presidents," noted Haley.

In Peru, recent polls show former military officer Ollanta Humala leading the race for the presidency. With the election scheduled for April 9, polls show Humala holds a narrow 42-to-38-percent lead over former Congresswoman Lourdes Flores.

The figures put him in position to replace Alejandro Toledo, a key U.S. ally who signed a free trade agreement with Washington last year.

Humala describes himself as a nationalist. He led a failed coup against President Alberto Fujimori in 2000, and is seen as a close ally of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivian President Evo Morales, two leaders who have been political thorns in Washington's side.

While Flores is seen as a pro-business candidate and the favorite of international investors, Humala has pledged to limit foreign investment in the Andean nation. He has also vowed to end the U.S.-sponsored campaign to eradicate coca production.

Davidson College political science professor Russell Crandall says a victory by Humala could pose political problems for Washington.

"Humala poses to be a much more anti-American nationalist president who could really complicate the United States' drug policies in the Andes in particular, especially given that last December we saw the victory of former coca leader and populist Evo Morales," said Crandall.

Haley, of the University of New Haven, says the recent success of left-leaning leaders in Latin America has its roots in the conservative policies held by previous administrations. While such policies have been successful in countries like Mexico, where Haley says some 750,000 jobs have been created since the 1992 North American Free Trade Agreement, expectations in other Latin American countries have not been met.

"More conservative economic policies were, to a great extent, oversold, as to how fast they would create the benefits," he added. "They were also oversold as far as what benefits they would bring."

The leftward shift has had its effects in Washington. Crandall says the Bush administration has begun to understand that dealing with Latin America in ways that can be seen as heavy-handed could cause more nations to adopt radical-style governments.

"So I think what you will see from Washington, from the Bush administration is a lot of diplomatic carrots," he commented. "They'll have diplomatic visits in an effort to demonstrate that Washington is willing and able to do business with the left in Latin America."

The United States has had its problems in Latin America over the years, including a decades-old feud with Cuban President Fidel Castro. Washington has also traded barbs with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez since his election in 1998.

More recently, newly-elected Bolivian President Evo Morales campaigned on promises to legalize the cultivation of coca, the base ingredient of cocaine. A former leader in the country's coca growers association, Mr. Morales had also vowed to be "a thorn in the side of the United States."