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Mexico's Fox creates stir by flying Virgin banner

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) -- The combustible mix of politics and religion continued to dog one of Mexico's leading presidential candidates Monday after he used a venerated religious symbol at a political rally.

Vicente Fox, nominated Sunday as the National Action Party (PAN) candidate for the July 2000 election, was criticized by church and government officials after he appeared at a rally Friday next to a banner emblazoned with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The Virgin -- believed by the faithful to have appeared before an Indian peasant in 1531 in what is now Mexico City -- is the most sacred religious symbol in this country of 98 million people, where some 90 percent are Roman Catholics.

Faced with mounting criticism, Fox, a former Coca-Cola Co. executive now on leave as governor of the central state of Guanajuato, backed down from earlier statements in which he said he would carry the banner in rallies around the country.

"The banner will be left at home but I'll carry the Virgin in my heart," Fox told Televisa network news Monday.

Fox said the banner was a gift from his children and he never intended it to be politicized, although his party has long openly identified with the Roman Catholic Church.

Mexico's Deputy Interior Minister for Religious Affairs, Humberto Lira Mora, told the same program that Fox's use of the Virgin of Guadalupe violated laws prohibiting the use of religious symbols in political and electoral activities.

Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, Mexico City's archbishop, called on politicians to spare the Virgin political campaigns.

"The Virgin of Guadalupe belongs to all Mexicans," he told reporters after Sunday Mass in Mexico City's cathedral. "It can't be used for political purposes by anybody."

Rival politician Francisco Labastida, one of four candidates for the presidential nomination of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party

(PRI), accused Fox of introducing "an explosive element" into the elections that could incite fanatic behavior.

While on a campaign stop in the western state of Jalisco, Labastida recalled "La Guerra Cristera," a war over strict anti-clerical laws in the 1920s. "We had a war and it cost us thousands and thousands of lives," he said of the conflict.

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