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Mexico resort city mayor, jailed in drug case, vows to stay in governor race

By William Booth
Monday, June 7, 2010

CANCUN, MEXICO -- The mayor of [Mexico's](#) most popular resort city, the most prominent politician arrested in the country's bloody three-year war against the drug cartels, vows to forge ahead with his campaign for governor -- from his cellblock at a maximum-security prison a thousand miles away.

If his name stays on the ballot, he could win, giving new meaning in Mexico to the most wanted list.

Cancun Mayor Gregorio Sánchez, an amateur nightclub crooner and sometime evangelical pastor, was arrested a week ago and charged with aiding not one but two major drug trafficking organizations. Prosecutors say he stashed \$2.5 million in half a dozen bank accounts and laundered cash for the cartels, money that police say cannot be explained by his income.

His arrest in Cancun, the No. 1 destination for U.S. tourists to Mexico, points to how deeply the Mexican political class is threatened by ties to organized crime.

"The campaign will continue -- it has never stopped," his wife, Niurka Saliva de Sánchez, dressed in chic black and wearing oversized sunglasses, said in an interview at an empty cafe near their beach home. She was accompanied by four bodyguards and a publicist.

Saliva denied reports that she would run for governor in her husband's place. Three months pregnant, she said she missed him "especially now, when I need him most." She said they both had received death threats from criminals frustrated by the couple's refusal to work with them.

"Am I afraid? No," she said. "If someone wants to kill me, I am at peace with God."

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involved in corruption scandals. "That kind of money in any politician's account is petty cash," wrote an editorialist at the Mexico News.

More sensational than the charges of graft is the accusation that Sánchez attended a clandestine summit last year in Acapulco with the heads of the top mafias. The warring cartels sought to negotiate a truce to end the bloodshed that has left more than 23,000 Mexicans dead, according to testimony from a confidential informant known in court papers only as "Lucifer."

Lucifer said Sánchez attended the meeting, alongside unnamed elected officials and

Aware that he was under investigation since January, Sánchez made a series of political ads before his arrest, calling himself a victim of political enemies, denying all charges and vowing to fight on. "This is a political lynching," said Sánchez, whose staff tweeted his protestations of innocence as he was being hauled away. The election is July 4.

Many Mexicans say they would not be especially shocked to learn that a Cancun mayor has a slush fund -- in fact, five of the city's previous seven mayors have been

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police commanders, in the company of cartel leader Arturo Beltrán Leyva, known as "the Boss of Bosses," who was shot dead by Mexican marines in a swank luxury high rise during a raid by authorities late last year. Beltrán Leyva was infamous for the pleasure he took in beheading his enemies.

Sánchez's wife said that there are explanations for all the money in his and her accounts, and that Sánchez was not in Acapulco on the day of the big meeting.

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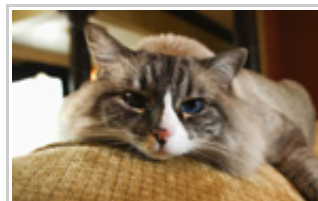
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