

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024037686248 MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Three months after taking charge of a new office created by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to compensate Mexicans for years of public sector embezzlement, its director quit, complaining the organization was tainted by corruption. The blow to the Institute for Returning to the People What Was Stolen (INDEP) is one of several recent cases to blot Lopez Obrador's image and undercut the message that his December 2018 investiture marked a sea change for a country awash in graft. On Sept. 22, INDEP director Jaime Cardenas submitted his letter of resignation, raising concerns over alleged misuse of proceeds from auctions of stolen assets, and the suspected theft of diamonds, emeralds and sapphires from the institute. To critics, the exit of his ally Cardenas is a symbol of Lopez Obrador's failure to deliver on his anti-corruption pledge. "Lopez Obrador's anti-corruption drive is much ado about nothing," said Emilio Alvarez Icaza, an independent opposition senator. "It's a great story, and a poor reality." Downplaying news which could embarrass him, Lopez Obrador routinely dismisses criticism as sour grapes from corrupt opponents, and points to landmark legislation he has passed that strips public servants of prosecutorial immunity. Opinion polls show he has made up ground he lost early in the coronavirus pandemic, lifted by his anti-corruption drive. Some give him an approval rating of over 60% as he gears up for national, state and municipal elections next June that will determine whether he can keep control of Congress. Under Lopez Obrador, Mexico has moved up eight places in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index to rank 130 out of 198 countries. Still, in 2019, the number of Mexicans who personally experienced public sector corruption rose 7%, according to the national statistics agency. Cynicism over politicians is deeply entrenched in Mexico, where an old joke still makes the rounds that Alvaro Obregon, who ruled from 1920-1924, was the country's least corrupt president because he only had one arm with which to steal. 'NOT ENOUGH' Scandals have also embroiled the families of some of Lopez Obrador's closest allies, including the son of a veteran politician who heads the state-run electricity company. The son, who denies wrongdoing, was in July barred from doing business with the government for overcharging state health authorities for ventilators to battle COVID-19. In August, videos surfaced of a brother of the president receiving cash in 2015 from a political operator who later won a post in Lopez Obrador's administration. Then, in September, a sister-in-law of Lopez Obrador, along with other local officials, resigned from the city hall of his hometown of Macuspana in Tabasco state amid what the opposition allege is a multimillion-dollar embezzlement scandal. "If the president thinks it's enough for him to be honest to end corruption, that's wrong," said Eduardo Bohorquez, director of the Mexican arm of Transparency International. In each case, Lopez Obrador, who promised to show family and friends no quarter over corruption, said the revelations had been exploited by hostile media and adversaries to hurt him. On INDEP, Lopez Obrador vowed to look into any complaints. But he called the resignation of Cardenas a political matter, and said there was "nothing to worry about." He vowed to have the footage of his brother Pio investigated, though no formal proceedings have begun. The cash handovers, Lopez Obrador said, were "contributions" to his political cause and not comparable with previous corruption. No proceedings have been brought against his sister-in-law Concepcion Falcon, who cited the "ungovernability" of Macuspana in quitting with her fellow councillors. Lopez Obrador verbally attacked the newspaper, Reforma, which publicized the case. Lopez Obrador argues that high-profile prosecutions of ex-officials for corruption show he is "moralizing" public life. One such prosecution involves Rosario Robles, a former ally accused of misuse of public funds in the last government. Another centers on a former head of state oil firm Pemex, Emilio Lozoya. Robles denies wrongdoing. Lozoya struck a plea bargain and accused his bosses of ordering him to channel bribes to politicians. Lozoya's revelations have kept the spotlight on alleged past misdeeds by top officials and encouraged Lopez Obrador to press for a public vote on putting his predecessors on trial. Despite concerns that such a referendum risks politicizing the normal passage of justice given that former presidents can already face prosecution, the Supreme Court this month declared it to be constitutional. Lopez Obrador wants the referendum held the day of June's mid-term elections. Even if that is not possible, his agitation over the issue may prove significant. "Keeping the corruption issue alive is politically beneficial for him," said Carlos Petersen, an analyst at the Eurasia Group, a consultancy. "Lopez Obrador will use (the referendum) to score points before the 2021 elections."