

11:21 13 Jan RTRS-NEWSMAKER-Lavin puts new spin on Chile politics

By Tiffany Woods

SANTIAGO, Jan 13 (Reuters) - A media-savvy mayor who gained fame for a foray into city sewers to chase disease-carrying rats, Joaquin Lavin is shaking up Chilean politics, emerging as a right-wing presidential candidate with a populist appeal.

After having virtually tied in December, Lavin, a former advisor to a government minister during Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship, hopes to beat leftist Ricardo Lagos, a former public works minister, in Sunday's run-off election.

Lavin, 46, is a new phenomenon in Chilean politics. He has taken the right wing to new ground and forced the left to tone down its ideological debates. It remains to be seen, however, whether Lavin is just another politician making promises or if he really is a new breed of neo-liberal leader.

The father of seven got his start in 1992 as mayor of the upscale Las Condes district in Santiago, where he earned fame with media-savvy stunts like driving kids to school when public transportation shut down and hiring a fleet of flashy, red Volkswagen Beetles to patrol neighborhoods as crime rose.

And when the deadly Hanta virus, spread by a species of rat, struck, Lavin threw on a protective suit, and like the Pied Piper, led the rodents out of Las Condes.

#### POPULIST CAMPAIGN

A former business editor of leading conservative daily El Mercurio, Lavin was virtually unknown outside Santiago until last year, when he launched his presidential campaign and embarked on a series of three trips across the country, during which he said he traversed 24,800 miles (40,000 km).

He donned ponchos and wool hats as he shook hands with farmers and fishermen in rural districts. He posed with locals for Polaroid snapshots, slept in "typical" Chilean homes and rode public transportation. He ate meals from a communal pot and lowered himself into an underground mine.

Lavin may have worn down the soles of his shoes, but his efforts paid off. On December 12, he posted the best electoral performance in at least 60 years by a right-wing presidential candidate in Chile.

The Chicago-educated economist even topped the 43 percent support Pinochet received in a 1988 referendum that asked the public if the now-retired general should continue his rule.

Lavin, the candidate for the Alliance for Chile, received 47.52 percent of valid votes against 47.96 percent for Socialist Lagos, who is running on the ruling coalition ticket. A runoff was forced because no one captured the 50 percent majority needed to replace President Eduardo Frei in March.

#### SHAKING UP POLITICS

The success of his populist appeal has forced the left to dilute its traditional ideological debates about economic and social models, role up its sleeves and take to the streets.

Lavin has also taken the right to new horizons, vowing to form a bank for the poor, create a million jobs, sell the presidential plane and raise some pensions.

He has managed to straddle the line between right and left, rich and poor and the explosive pro- and anti-Pinochet debate, a feat worth mentioning in a country still polarized by the retired army general's 17-year regime.

"He says things that the right wing has never been accustomed to saying," said one of his close friends, who wished to remain anonymous. "But that opens him up to people who have not necessarily been traditional right-wing voters."

Populist campaign aside, a former general secretary of Chile's extreme right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI) party, Lavin embraces the right, which tends to be allied with the powerful business community and the Roman Catholic Church. He even advocates the death penalty.

Lavin still wears the exclusive Polo pony on his shirts even as he shakes hands with the poor.

Because he has portrayed himself as a neo-liberal Robin Hood, "Lavin's biggest problem will be when the public asks him to fulfill his promises," said Ricardo Israel, director of the Political Science Institute at the University of Chile.

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