

## IN ATTACK MODE, A RIGHTIST SURGES IN MEXICO

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TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ, [Mexico](#), May 19 — Felipe Calderón loves to make allusions to Mexican folk songs. These days, the conservative candidate for president is particularly fond of recalling a song about a nag named Relámpago who upsets a glistening champion, Moro, in a race.



Adam Wiseman for The New York Times

Felipe Calderón, of the National Action Party, speaking to voters last week in Tonalá, Mexico.

"I was not the favorite," he boomed over loudspeakers to a crowd of farmers, fishermen and business owners in the town of Tonalá on a swing in Chiapas on Thursday. "I was not the one who was up in the polls, but do you know what I did, gentlemen? I went to work. I set about telling Mexicans what each candidate really stands for."

After six months in second place, Mr. Calderón has surged past the front-runner, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, with a stream of attack advertisements portraying him as a dangerous and violent leftist who will bankrupt the country.

Now, a month before the vote, the race is a contest between Mr. Calderón, a free-trade advocate backed by business leaders, and Mr. López Obrador, a leftist who draws most of his support from poor people who feel that free-trade policies have failed to help them.

For his part, Mr. López Obrador, 53, who was mayor of Mexico City until last year, dismisses the recent polls as "propaganda" and claims the numbers have been massaged to undercount working-class voters. Under his stewardship, Mexico City's finances remained solid. As for the charge that he is dangerous, he calls it simply ludicrous.

Mr. Calderón, 43, a former congressman and energy minister, has engineered the turnaround with a nimble, slick campaign, relying heavily on radio and television advertisements, many of them negative, tested in focus groups and tailored to specific constituencies, his aides say. Mexicans vote July 2.

Mr. Calderón, of President Vicente Fox's National Action Party, has outspent Mr. López Obrador two to one on attack ads that, among other things, link the left-leaning candidate to [Hugo Chávez](#), Venezuela's anti-American president. He has also deftly played on the perception that Mr. López Obrador, of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, has an authoritarian streak and a reputation as a rabble-rouser because of raucous protests against election fraud he led over a decade ago. Mr. Calderón's ads call his rival "a danger to Mexico."

The personal attacks on Mr. López Obrador were among several strategic shifts by Mr. Calderón's young campaign team in late March. Mr. Calderón now embraces President Fox, after first keeping him at arm's length, and staunchly defends the government's record on social programs and the economy.

Mr. Calderón has also dropped his stuffy stump speech about the virtues of open markets and foreign investment, opting for a simpler message: he now vows to create jobs, jobs and more jobs. His ads call him the "president of employment," and his slogan is "My job will be to make sure you have a job."

One thing that unites the candidates is their opposition to President Bush's plan to build a wall along the border and deploy the National Guard. Both say the way to stop illegal [immigration](#) is to create more jobs and investment in Mexico.

Mr. Calderón has also stolen a page from Mr. López Obrador, who promises a raft of government subsidies and handouts. Mr. Calderón, a fiscal and social conservative, now makes a point of saying he will extend and expand the welfare and health care programs Mr. Fox put in place. The promise to keep government largesse flowing draws the biggest applause at his rallies.

The upshot has been a remarkable political comeback. In January, five major surveys by respected pollsters showed Mr. Calderón trailing Mr. López Obrador by 6 to 10

percentage points. In April and May, however, all five polls showed the race tightening with a slim lead for Mr. Calderón.

"We've managed to change the subject of the election," said Juan Camilo Mouriño, 34, Mr. Calderón's campaign manager, as he sat behind his desk in a dark blue suit at campaign headquarters, checking sports scores on a new laptop.

Mr. Mouriño said the inner circle of the campaign had a fierce debate before deciding to bombard Mr. López Obrador with negative advertisements. An attempt to knock him off the ballot for ignoring a court order failed badly last year, only making him more popular. The conventional wisdom was, the more you attack Mr. López Obrador, the stronger he gets by casting himself as the victim of a conspiracy.

But Mr. Calderón was trailing by 10 percentage points in late February. His free-trade message and "Passion and Values for Mexico" slogan was falling flat. "We had to make adjustments," Mr. Mouriño said. One of the architects of the new campaign was Antonio Solá, 34, a Spanish political consultant who was a top consultant to former Prime Minister [José María Aznar](#).

Mr. Mouriño said he also had several informal conversations about the campaign with [Dick Morris](#), the American consultant who once worked for former President [Bill Clinton](#), but the Calderón team decided not to hire him.

Mr. López Obrador's campaign has been slow to respond. Until recently, the candidate had resisted advice to respond to mudslinging with mudslinging of his own. Only this week did his party broadcast a radio spot calling Mr. Calderón "a liar."

Besides taking his time to go on the offensive, Mr. López Obrador has made other gaffes, his aides concede. In February, he ridiculed Mr. Fox, called him a chattering bird and told him to "shut up" and stay out of the campaign, handing Mr. Calderón fodder for his claim that Mr. López Obrador is intolerant.

The leftist's decision in April to pass up the first debate, a classic front-runner's tactic, also backfired. Most analysts say it contributed to the notion that he can be arrogant, and contemptuous of other viewpoints. Mr. López Obrador has also refused to let his aides use his modest lifestyle or his close relationship with his sons to soften his image, some inside the campaign say.

As for the polls, Mr. López Obrador says they are the fabrications of media barons in a conspiracy to defeat him. (His aides maintain that their internal polls show he fell

behind early this month, but has regained ground and now leads Mr. Calderón by six percentage points.)

Mr. López Obrador has stubbornly insisted on running a grass-roots campaign that relies more on speeches in town squares, loudspeakers atop cars and word of mouth than on television and radio spots, his campaign aides say. That decision could turn out to be a stroke of genius or his biggest mistake.

"The strategy will stay the same, because that's Andrés Manuel's way of campaigning," said Ricardo Monreal, a senior aide. "His way of campaigning is, as always before, street by street, town by town, at the level of the people. He believes he will beat the marketing campaign that way."

Mr. Monreal added: "We all know that marketing has carried a lot of current presidents into office around the world. But López Obrador isn't relying on this. He is relying on the strategy of the street."

Still, Mr. López Obrador has made some adjustments, said César Yáñez, his spokesman and a close adviser. For months, the candidate avoided interviews, unless they were with local radio stations. He has always been obsessive about controlling his message.

In the last two weeks, however, he has submitted to three interviews on national television. He even let himself be lampooned on a morning show by a political satirist who wears a clown outfit.

He has also begun to needle Mr. Calderón. Last week, he said the conservative candidate was a captive of his campaign advisers.

Mr. Calderón has kept up the invective. In Chiapas on Thursday, he leapt on Mr. López Obrador's comment that President Fox was "a puppet" of the United States because of his restrained criticism of the [United States Senate's](#) support for more walls along the border.

President Chávez of Venezuela had used the same word to describe Mr. Fox last fall, and Mr. Calderón did not let the chance pass to tar Mr. López Obrador again with the Chávez brush. "He's an intolerant man, a very aggressive man, a hostile man and he has devoted himself to insulting the president," he said of his rival. Mr. López Obrador, however, has kept his distance from Mr. Chávez.

The managers of both campaigns say the race is too close to call. The camps agree that the final debate on June 6, the only face-to-face confrontation between Mr. Calderón and Mr. López Obrador, will be pivotal.

"The debate will be important, and I say the dirty war has a limit in its impact on the election," Senator Ortega said.

"We have to win the debate," Mr. Mouriño said.