

In Mexico, Rivals Perfected Art of Political Roadshow

Election Day Caps a Campaign Season Notable for Theatricality and Variety

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MEXICO CITY, July 1 -- They've cavorted with transvestite television hosts, worn flouncy flower crowns, raffled off steers, commissioned skimpy skirts and shorts bearing their names -- and much, much more. Now, on what might have been a restful Sunday morning, they want Mexicans to get up and say: You're our leader.

This country's baroque approach to politics has been on full, fabulous, flashy display for months as the leading candidates, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Felipe Calderón and Roberto Madrazo, relentlessly traipsed across Mexico looking for votes. Part variety show, part country fair, a campaign appearance by a Mexican presidential candidate draws a bigger crowd -- a far bigger crowd -- than a Big Ten football game, and can make a U.S. political rally look puny and tame by comparison.

Syrupy mangoes, splitting open in the midday heat, scent the air while the candidates lampoon their opponents as variously too short, too violent or too corrupt. Someone is always selling chicharones, the comically gigantic sheets of deep-fried pork fat that Mexicans crave. Ranchera songs blast at eardrum-destroying decibel levels from fluted speakers mounted on car roofs. Leather-faced men, bused in from the countryside, stand watching it all with slightly bemused expressions, clutching the free lunches and T-shirts that have enticed them to spend a day listening to promises they've heard many times before.

Each of the political parties, and each of the candidates, projects a different tone, a different sense of style, proportion and theatrics. Calderón, the master of precision political-speak, clips through tightly choreographed road shows, nailing each of his cues and punctuating applause lines with sharp, well-practiced hand chops. Madrazo, the struggling candidate of Mexico's longtime former ruling party, convenes grand, ostentatious displays, accompanied by fireworks that sound like cannons booming nearby. But it is López Obrador, the populist hero of Mexico's poor, who is the super-sizer of Mexican politics.

No one really knows how many people turned out for his last extravaganza Wednesday evening at the Zocalo, the downtown Mexico City square rivaled in size only by Red Square in Moscow and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The capital's ambulance service guessed 210,000, but there were so many people hanging from balconies, teetering on rooftops, stuffed into side streets and craning their necks from logjammed subway exits that the figure certainly could have been higher.

López Obrador knows how to hit. He has called President Vicente Fox "a squawking bird" and suggested, not so politely, that Fox "shut up" about the campaign. But it wasn't Fox-bashing that really fired up the clump of union laborers mashed into a corner of the Zocalo the other night -- it was the zingers aimed at all the other presidents.

Leonardo Ugalde slapped his buddy Raul Cortez on the shoulder and let out a war whoop when López Obrador promised to erase what he said was an \$18,000-a-month pension for former -president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who left office in 1994 under a

cloud of scandal. (Salinas has told friends the figure is \$8,000.) "How much are they robbing?" another of Ugalde's friends, Juan Cruz, called out seconds later when López Obrador also promised to strip Miguel de la Madrid of his ex-president's pension. "And how little do the people get?"

"Amlo," the nickname derived from López Obrador's initials, is a feel-your-pain kind of campaigner. If the crowd has no shade on a fiercely hot day, he steps into the sun to speak, a habit that has left him deeply tanned. If the crowd is getting soaked with rain, as it was at the Zocalo, he turns away umbrellas and finishes his speeches damp.

Madrazo opts for pageantry. His campaign team loves bullrings, concrete venues perfect for echo-producing clatter. They are also small enough that his Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, can fill the house without the embarrassing empty seats that might have showcased his flagging prospects in a larger stadium.

At rallies, the PRI's problems at the top of the ticket get overshadowed by its spectacular organizational reach. In Pachuca, the bullring was a sea of red T-shirts urging votes for González, Meléndez, Vega, Muñoz -- each a PRI congressional or local candidate. What was missing were Madrazo T-shirts or hats or enthusiasm.

Madrazo told his listeners he was the candidate "of the center," between López Obrador on the left and Calderón on the right. If they don't vote for him, he has said often, voters will get "violence" -- an allusion to oft-repeated yet unproven and hotly denied claims that López Obrador was involved in the shooting death of his brother long ago. Or, Madrazo says, they'll get a candidate without "the stature" to run Mexico, a comment he illustrates by holding his hand at chest level to mock the diminutive Calderón.

Calderón, by now, must be used to it. He's had to battle the "geek factor" from the beginning. Making fun of him is a full-time sport in Mexico.

His face seems like the face of a nerd," said Jorge Chabat, a Mexico City political analyst, invoking a frequently repeated image. "It's like he's the well-behaved boy who does all his homework."

During a photo op this spring, Calderón slipped his less-than-athletic frame into shorts and played soccer with some journalists. The photo of him grimacing as he whacks at the ball has come to be known as his "Dukakis-in-the-tank moment," a reference to a much-mocked photo of Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis during the 1988 U.S. presidential race.

Calderón doesn't bother to hit back at Madrazo on the stump. Nor does López Obrador. There's no point. The PRI candidate has been a non-factor for much of the campaign.

Instead, Calderón lets loose a pair of high-energy warm-up guys with booming voices and hipster haircuts. By the time Calderón hits the stage, the crowd is roaring.

Calderón is no López Obrador when it comes to drawing mega-crowds, but he's no slouch, either. Last week, he drew more than 100,000 fans to Estadio Azteca, Mexico City's soccer stadium.

On the road, the rituals of Mexican campaigns sometimes seem to pain Calderón. On a recent day in Huejutla, a mountain town in the central state of Hidalgo, he stood stone-faced as women from the Huastecan indigenous community sprinkled flower petals on his head and draped him with flower necklaces. Finally, as the music blasted through the speakers, he was persuaded to take a few halting, awkward dance steps with several of the women.

His composure returned when someone handed him a microphone.

"I will continue the farm programs of President Fox," he declared, sounding a theme of continuity that has been more prominent in his campaign in the past month.

The line was a hit. The crowd erupted. But Calderón's next sentence was barely audible. Two separate bands in the audience had launched into oom-pah, oom-pah rhythms, accordions and tubas drowning out the speech.

A skinny man with a croaky voice called out, "Ice cream, ice cream, who wants ice cream?" A group of little girls giggled and braided each other's hair. For a moment, with Calderón having lost hold of his audience, it could have been a weekend fair, a holiday gathering, a birthday party.

Then a man in a stiff-brimmed hat pointed upward, and a dozen faces turned to the sky. "It's an omen," he said.

There, high above, was a celestial marvel: a rainbow, bright, clear and in the shape of a perfect circle. Calderón kept talking, but his audience was looking to the heavens.