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First Presidential Debate Marked By Attacks on Front-runner Enrique Peña Nieto

By Carlos Navarro

The four candidates seeking to become the next president of Mexico squared off in an uninspiring and sometimes confusing debate marked by attacks and disqualifications.

"Three of the four candidates seeking the presidency in the July 1 election interacted in a disorderly and perhaps schizophrenic manner," said the Coahuila-based daily newspaper Vanguardia. "They mixed criticisms with promises that have already been heard for the last few months in advertisements and interviews."

For many observers, the crux of the problem during the first presidential debate, held on May 6, was the rigidity of the event, which was organized by the federal electoral agency (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE). But the four candidates— Enrique Peña Nieto of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Josefina Vázquez Mota of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Andrés Manuel López Obrador of a center-left coalition, and Gabriel Quadri de la Torre of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)—had agreed to the format beforehand and had prior knowledge of the questions that the moderator was going to ask. Each candidate was given two minutes to respond and 90 seconds for a rebuttal.

"Everyone talked about what they wanted," says Aldo Muñoz, a political analyst at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (UAEMEX). "None of the issues was discussed with any depth. So the one who wins the debate is the one who was ahead in the first place."

While critics agreed that the attacks detracted from the debate, another major distraction occurred at the beginning of the event. The audience in the auditorium where the debate took place—as well as the candidates—was stunned when a former Playboy model in a skintight white evening gown handed out the pieces of paper distributed to candidates that randomly assigned the speaking order. The model, Julia Orayen, was serving as an edecán, a role that has long been traditional for formal political, business, or entertainment events in Mexico.

This image was broadcast to a national audience, prompting respondents to a random poll to declare that the edecán was the winner of the debate. The IFE, an organization with a conservative reputation, immediately issued an apology and acknowledged that Orayen's choice of clothing was a mistake. But the institute also put the blame on an independent producer hired to plan the debate.

Another debate is scheduled for June 10, just a few weeks before the election, and the candidates are already calling for a different format that will allow a more thorough discussion of their positions.

Voter preferences little changed

Many analysts agree that this debate did little to change voter preferences less than two months before the election. In a handful of polls in the aftermath of the debate, Peña Nieto remained far ahead of Vázquez Mota and López Obrador. One poll—commissioned by the Mexico daily newspaper El Universal and conducted by Loger Consultores among 2,100 respondents on the night of the debate—had the PRI candidate with 36.3% support, compared with 23.4% for López Obrador, whose coalition includes the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Movimiento Ciudadano. Support for Vázquez Mota stood at 22% and in the single digits for Quadri.

With Peña Nieto ahead in the polls, the clear strategy for Vázquez Mota and López Obrador was to levy sharp attacks on the front-runner, who is also representing the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM). The almost scripted nature of the debate favored Peña Nieto, who has been known to make embarrassing statements when forced to ad lib. This was the case with an appearance at the International Book Fair (Feria Internacional del Libro, FIL) in November 2011, when Peña Nieto made some comments that clearly made PRI officials nervous.

"Many people thought he was going to slip up," said José Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) in Mexico City. "His performance, without being spectacular, was sufficiently better than expected, and he can come away without such bad marks."

The PRI-PVEM candidate held his own in the face of sharp attacks by López Obrador and Vázquez Mota, who criticized his record as governor of México state and linked the candidate to the PRI's past record of corruption. Vázquez Mota, for example, referred to an article in the British business newspaper The Economist, which questioned the accuracy of homicide statistics during Peña Nieto's tenure as governor. She also took the opportunity to link Peña Nieto to a PRI that blocked the approval of labor reforms in Congress.

The México state governor struck back by pointing out that Vázquez Mota, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, was absent during a key vote on labor reform. "We weren't able to reach consensus [on some important issues] because of your absence in the Chamber of Deputies," Peña Nieto told his PAN rival.

López Obrador attempted to link Peña Nieto to the giant corporations that control the broadcast media. The center-left candidate suggested that Televisa, Mexico's leading television network, was using its influence to ensure that Peña Nieto wins the July 1 election. The center-left candidate then criticized Peña Nieto for spending more than 690 million pesos (US\$51.3 million) on publicity during his first year as governor. "If television was capable of creating presidents, you would already be elected to that office," Peña Nieto told López Obrador, who served as mayor of Mexico City in 2000-2005. "You spent 1 billion pesos (US\$74 million) during your term in office on advertisements."

Peña Nieto's vigorous defense of his record and his party and the lack of embarrassing mistakes might have consolidated support among voters who sympathize with the PRI and also likely won him some leverage with undecided voters.

Citizen candidate Gabriel Quadri excels

Dozens of polls appeared after the debate rating the performance of the candidates. Most simply reflected opinions of respondents on how the candidate performed and did not necessarily reflect voter preferences. A poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma gave the victory to Vázquez Mota, another one by El Universal said Peña Nieto was the victor, and Reporte Índigo indicated that López Obrador was the winner.

The surprise, however, was the strong performance of Quadri de la Torre in the debates, and this was reflected in the many polls in which respondents declared him the winner. Even in polls where he did not win, Quadri came in second or third. Quadri—who portrayed himself as the "nonpolitician" or "citizen candidate"—is an environmental advocate recruited by PANAL to represent the party in the election.

And Quadri clearly offered the most articulate and complete answers on all the major issues presented to the panel of candidates. His answers were especially detailed when the candidates were asked about their vision for Mexico's energy policy—and in particular policy regarding renewable energy. Even though all candidates supported developing alternatives to hydrocarbons, the proposals from Quadri, who once headed the Instituto Nacional de Ecología (INE), were more detailed. "Mexico could become a power in renewable energy," said Quadri. "But we need to take two actions: end the government monopoly on electricity and support companies that produce energy from renewable sources."

Quadri said the IFE's decision to include the topic of renewable energy in the debate was a victory in and of itself. "For me, that was an important step because the politicians were forced to study the topic or read something about it," said the PANAL candidate, who has proposed including the development and promotion of renewable energy as one of the tasks for the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT).

A group of specialists in politics, culture, security, technology, energy, and the judicial process gathered to assess the debate. The evaluation came in three phases. First, the experts responded to a questionnaire before the debate indicating their voting preferences. Then, they

took notes and evaluated each candidate in real time during the debate. Finally, they filled out another questionnaire to evaluate the full performance of the four candidates.

"Quadri surprised me," said Teresa Rodríguez, a public relations expert. "Even though he exaggerated some things, he presented clear and in-depth proposals while the others were squabbling."

A poll by BGC y Grupo Imagen among residents of the Mexico City area found that Gabriel Quadri was the candidate who left the most positive impression. Similar results came from surveys by respected pollster María de las Heras, W Radio, and others.

"The environmentalist increased his visibility," columnist José Cárdenas wrote in the Mexico daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "He legitimized his qualities, sold his citizen image, and will likely ensure that PANAL continues as a registered party after the elections."

Cárdenas noted that Quadri got a free ride during the debate because none of the three other candidates attacked him or his proposals directly. But there were some drawbacks to his image as a citizen candidate. "While the poll by María de las Heras portrayed him as the most serious, freshest, and structured of the four candidates, most respondents unfortunately also considered him the one least prepared to govern."

[Pesodollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 9, 2012, reported at 13.43 pesos per US\$1.00.]