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Presidential Campaign Heats Up; Lopez Obrador Calls Fox 'Squawking Bird'

by LADB Staff

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Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the presidential candidate for the center-left coalition Alianza por el Bien de Todos, has spiced up the presidential campaign by calling President Vicente Fox a "squawking bird." Lopez Obrador, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), made the comment several times in the course of his campaign to protest Fox's indirect support for Felipe Calderon, a member of the president's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

Under Mexican law, the president is required to remain neutral, but Fox has skirted the law by launching a television and radio campaign to promote the accomplishments of his PAN-led government without even mentioning Calderon. "If we continue down this path, tomorrow Mexico will be better than today," Fox says in the commercials.

Lopez Obrador, whose coalition also includes the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), insists that Fox is using the TV spots to indirectly boost Calderon's candidacy.

Roberto Madrazo and officials from his Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) have also condemned the television spots, but the most pointed criticisms have come from Lopez Obrador, who has called Fox the "chachalaca mayor," in reference to a noisy game bird resembling a turkey, which is found in Mexico and Central America. The term chachalaca is rooted in the Nahuatl word chachalacatl, which means to speak loudly. The word is often used in Mexico to describe a loudmouth. "He does act like a chachalaca, he screeches like a chachalaca," Lopez Obrador said in one of his speeches, in reference to Fox. "The president has to shut up, with all due respect."

Court orders Fox to halt radio, television spots

While Lopez Obrador was waging an overt campaign against Fox's intervention in the campaign, legislators from the PRD, the PRI, and other opposition parties quietly took the complaints about Fox's media spots to the country's highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN). The legislators' efforts were rewarded with two rulings in their favor. In a preliminary ruling in February, Justice Jose de Jesus Gudino Pelayo ordered the commercials to be suspended.

If the ads were allowed to continue, he said, they could have an irreversible effect on the electoral outcome. Gudino's ruling was put on hold, however, after Fox's legal advisor Juan de Dios Castro appealed the decision. The matter then went to the full court, which sided with Gudino. In a 9-2 decision in early April, the court upheld Gudino's decision, announcing that the ads must be suspended until a final verdict is reached.

The court's decision does not settle the question of whether the executive is in violation of electoral laws by running the advertisements. The ruling does, however, take the ads off the air for the rest of the campaign season, since a decision will probably not be handed down for about three months. A court spokesperson said the decision was a precautionary measure to prevent the executive from continuing to spend public resources, which would not be recoverable if the ruling went against the president.

Lopez Obrador dips in polls

Lopez Obrador acknowledged that his comments about Fox's involvement in the presidential campaign might have crossed the line. "I always look for a balance between the heart and the head, between passion and reason," he told interviewer Victor Trujillo on the popular morning news program *El Crystal con que Se Mira*. "But I'm not a machine. I'm not perfect. Sometimes passion wins."

But the PRD candidate also said he would not stop referring to the president as a squawking bird if he continued to use his bully pulpit to support Calderon. "I'm not justifying my [wording], but the president must not involve himself in the election," he said. "He was criticizing us indirectly every day. The president went too far."

Later, in a campaign speech, Lopez Obrador repeated his commitment to force Fox to stop the backhanded endorsement of Calderon. "I will continue to call Fox the top chachalaca as long as he insists on campaigning against me," said the PRD candidate.

Some analysts said that Lopez Obrador's aggressiveness may have backfired and his frequent use of the word *chachalaca* may have been interpreted as disrespect for the office of the presidency, as evidenced by his decline in several polls. One public opinion survey by widely respected polling organization *Consulta Mitofsky* reported a decline of two percentage points in support for Lopez Obrador.

Mitofsky president Roy Campos said interviews indicated that the narrowing of the gap between Lopez Obrador and his rivals was not so much a result of Calderon's and Madrazo's improved standing among the electorate, but more an increasing anxiety about the PRD candidate.

Syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa said Lopez Obrador should have desisted from the direct attacks on Fox, given that the SCJN was almost certainly going to stop the president from continuing the ads. "Without the bad strategy employed by [Lopez Obrador], the courts were able to order President Fox to keep quiet," said Granados.

Other polls showed Calderon and Madrazo narrowing the gap even more than the *Mitofsky* poll. One poll by *Beltran y Asociados* showed Calderon moving to within two percentage points of Lopez Obrador. Another poll, organized by *Grupo de Economistas Asociados (GEA)*, actually had Calderon moving slightly ahead of Lopez Obrador. Syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said Lopez Obrador's decline might also be a result of the relentless negative attacks that the PRI and PAN have launched in television and radio advertisements. Among other things, the two parties

have highlighted Lopez Obrador's refusal to hold more than one debate and also pointed to the huge debts he left during his term as Mexico City mayor.

Lopez Obrador is also facing some discontent within his own party, with many members accusing him of imposing PRI defectors as candidates for at-large Senate seats, leaving many members of the party outside the process. Sarmiento acknowledged that polls conducted by GEA and Beltran y Asociados should be viewed with a measure of caution. "We'll have to wait for more polls to see whether this represented a major decline in Lopez Obrador's popularity or whether this was simply an error by a few pollsters," said the columnist. "The logical move for Lopez Obrador's strategists is to start taking precautionary actions."

Venezuelan involvement in PRD campaign alleged

During the campaign, the PAN has sought to link Lopez Obrador to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. In one campaign advertisement, the PAN compared Lopez Obrador's comment asking Fox to "shut up," to a similar comment made by Chavez following the Summit of the Americas in November 2005. At the summit, Fox sharply criticized Chavez for opposing the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). This drew a sharp rebuke from the Venezuelan president, who called the Mexican president a "lapdog" of the US (see SourceMex, 2005-11-16).

The PAN has also made other efforts to link the PRD campaign to Chavez, accusing the Venezuelan president of meddling in the Mexican campaign by helping organize local cells in Mexico to support Lopez Obrador. The involvement of foreign individuals or organizations in the Mexican electoral process is not only frowned upon but also illegal.

The PAN got into hot water earlier this year for allowing Spain's conservative former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to endorse Calderon during a speech to party members in Mexico City (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01). Both Lopez Obrador and the Chavez administration have denied that Venezuela has been involved in any way in the campaign efforts of the Alianza por el Bien de Todos. "The allegations that I have connections with Chavez are false," said Lopez Obrador, who then criticized the PAN for allowing foreign involvement in Fox's presidential election in 2000 via campaign donations originating from the US.

In 2003, Mexico's electoral watchdog, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), imposed a stiff fine against the PAN and its 2000 coalition partner the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) for surpassing campaign spending limits and accepting money from a California-based donor (see SourceMex, 2003-10-15). "I am a man of principles," said Lopez Obrador. "I am not like Fox, I do not need to solicit money overseas."

There were also official denials from Venezuela. "[There is] a constant campaign coming from Mexico against Venezuela, organized by powerful sectors of the press with ties to others belonging to the government of that country," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez.

While the Fox administration may be privately encouraging the PAN's efforts to link Lopez Obrador to Chavez, officials are publicly denying any Venezuelan involvement in the Mexican election. "In our opinion, the Venezuelan government has been conducting itself in a correct manner," Foreign

Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez told reporters. (Sources: www.thefreedictionary.com;
www.academia.org.mx/dbm; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 03/22/06, 03/27/06, 04/03/06; El
Economista, 03/29/06, 04/04/06; El Universal, 03/30/06, 03/31/06, 04/04/06; La Crisis, 03/31/06; La
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03/22/06, 03/30/06, 03/31/06, 04/01/06, 04/04/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/03/06, 04/04/06; El Financiero,
04/04/06)

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