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From the *Los Angeles Times*

## 'Tomato King' Has a Few Hurlled at Him

After finding success in California, he's drawing fire as mayor of his hometown in Mexico.

By Sam Enriquez

Times Staff Writer

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JEREZ, Mexico — The TV news crew set up quickly and was ready to roll when the "Tomato King" raised a big and calloused hand.

Wait, he ordered. Everybody froze.

An aide arrived a minute later clutching a black cowboy hat.

"It's what gives a man character," the Tomato King said as he set the hat snug on his head; with another wave the mayor signaled he was ready.

Back when he was running for office, Andres Bermudez's campaign team conjured up the title to better package the portly, middle-aged emigre who'd spent the last three decades farming in California. But critics complain he's taking the nickname a bit too literally.

Fifteen months after Mexico's famous prodigal son moved from Yolo County to run Jerez, local newspapers rail against him, calling him autocratic and referring to him as El Tomaton, the Big Tomato. Shoppers downtown say he's done nothing. A taxi driver summed up his problem with the mayor this way: He's pigheaded.

The list of accusations is long and unproven: extravagance, arrogance, nepotism, cronyism, misuse of public funds, even sexual assault. Bermudez denies any wrongdoing and calls the charges libel and slander. One of his allies says the opposition is driven by prejudice among well-heeled locals against a poor boy who moved to America, prospered over time and eventually became a landowner and commercial farmer.

It all leaves Bermudez wondering why he ever bothered to come back to Zacatecas, the only Mexican state where expatriates are eligible to run for office.

He left a 600-acre farm, a big house and a swimming pool for this?

"Some of the people don't like they way I do things," Bermudez said with wide-eyed sarcasm.

For one, critics say, he holds municipal dinners and luncheons at his brother's restaurant instead of spreading the money around. They say his gasoline, cellphone and travel bills are too high. And because he controls 12 votes on the 20-member council, what he says goes.

Even supporters acknowledge that Bermudez doesn't always follow the rules.

"Most of the complaints have to do with spending," said Vicente Marquez, who signs the checks at City Hall. "Some were costs that needed approval. He spent the money and then got approval."

Marquez's family is split over the mayor. His sister, Councilwoman Adriana Marquez Sanchez, is a leader of the anti-Bermudez faction. Last month, she and another council member went on a hunger strike against him, a protest that devolved into a weekend takeover of City Hall by a group of anti-Bermudez demonstrators.

"The 'Tomato King' is a myth," she said. "He promised to make Jerez a progressive city.... He said he came to do big projects. Ask anyone — what projects? What new businesses? Not one."

Bermudez, who says opponents won't let him do his job, isn't quite ready to throw in the towel. His three-year term ends in September 2007. Reelection isn't allowed in Mexico, so this is his only chance to show that an emigrant can return and change his hometown for the better.

"Right now, I'm the first. After this, lots of people will come back," he said. "I put a seed in the ground and I want to see what comes up. I have to do it for my people in Jerez, for the United States and for Mexico."

Many are rooting for him. His brusque, unpolished style marks Bermudez as a *campesino*, a man of the fields, say the retirees in cowboy hats who lounge on benches in the town square. "The rich don't like him," Trinidad Vega, 77, said.

Farmers and ranchers here respect a man who has made his fortune from the soil, especially because the beans, corn and chiles grown around here provide only the slimmest living.

At the demonstration last month, fervent Bermudez supporters tossed out the protesters who had seized City Hall and took it back by force. Riot police stood by, apparently unsure which side to take.

When the doors were finally pried open with a crowbar, Bermudez led his entourage inside, a procession broadcast nationwide. At his desk, mobbed by well-wishers and media, he broke down sobbing.

"Why won't they leave me in peace?" he told TV Jerez, whose reporter, apparently in keeping with the day's circus atmosphere, was dressed like a clown, with greasepaint, a porkpie hat and sunglasses. "Why can't a *campesino* govern?"

Bermudez brags about the cement, sheet metal roofs and backpacks he's given to the needy, as well as the newly paved roads. He's started free bus service for students to attend the university in Zacatecas, an hour away.

But some campaign promises, such as creating hundreds of jobs, have gone unfulfilled. Governing, it turns out, is a lot harder than growing tomatoes.

"It might not be the best way he's using to change Jerez, but it's one way," said Raymundo Carrillo, an unpaid advisor who's acted as Bermudez's Karl Rove since 2000. "The people here who don't like him have never emigrated."

Like nearly half the population of Zacatecas, Bermudez left home young and poor. And like many, he blossomed in California, starting out as a farm laborer in 1974 but discovering within a few years that he could make much more as a farm-labor contractor. He eventually bought land, where he grew tomatoes and other produce, and designed a machine to more easily transplant seedlings.

He was flattered by the idea that he could return a successful man to teach a thing or two to his brethren back home.

Jerez is a town of 50,000 people who rely on the dollars sent home by migrant fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. The narrow, well-kept streets downtown are lined with appliance stores, clothing boutiques, restaurants, jewelers, clinics and fancy coffin shops. One block holds half a dozen currency exchange services.

Bermudez first ran for office in 2001 with the help of local businessmen who wanted a more progressive government.

"Nobody knew him in the beginning, so I named him the Tomato King," said Ismael Solis, 40, the owner of a building supply store and Bermudez's first campaign coordinator.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, had run Jerez, like most of Mexico, for seven decades. The Tomato King, said Solis, "was the guy who was going to take out the PRI. We built him up, made him an icon, to give people hope."

Bermudez won the race but was declared ineligible before he could take office because he hadn't lived here a full year, a requirement since dropped. He returned to California.

Solis, after a falling-out with Bermudez, served as mayor instead for the three-year term and credited Bermudez with breaking the PRI's hold on City Hall.

Bermudez kept in close touch with supporters during those years through visits and conference calls between Jerez and his home west of Sacramento, Carrillo said. When Bermudez ran again in 2004, he won easily.

Bermudez has a good heart but lacks the capacity to govern, Solis said: "He has no political sensibility. He doesn't listen to people."

Jerez isn't the same place it was when Bermudez left, Solis added, when government relied on image and giveaways to hold power.

Many others are disappointed that Bermudez has been unable to make good on the grander promises he made while campaigning.

"I will personally invest \$1 million in two canneries that will create 600 jobs if I win," he told The Times just before the July 4, 2004, election. "You have my word on that."

And there is little evidence so far that he will be able to dissuade Jerez's young people from making the same trek north to find work.

But summoning up his trademark bravado, Bermudez said just his presence at City Hall was a significant victory.

"There are millions of Mexicans in the United States, and every one of them wants to come back and find a different country," he said. "Jerez is already different. As soon as I crossed the border, it changed."

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*Carlos Martinez of The Times' Mexico City Bureau contributed to this report.*

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