

RHINO HORNS IN ON A BRAZILIAN ELECTION

A big write-in candidate wins vote but loses seat

RIO DE JANEIRO

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL had an election for the city council last week and quite a few of its 3.5 million citizens, it seemed, were in the mood for a serious protest vote. Suburban sewers were in bad shape, prices were high and there was a serious shortage of meat and beans. There was no shortage, however, of candidates—540 of them running for 45 council seats. "Better elect a rhinoceros," somebody said, "than an ass." And so they did.

A pleasant, lazy female rhino named Cacareco had been borrowed from the zoo in Rio to help open the new São Paulo zoo. Her name is Portuguese for "rubbish," which recalls her somewhat formless appearance when she was born. But now she was 4 years old, confident-looking, fat and a popular attraction. She was so well known, in fact, that the papers here in Rio started a campaign to get her back from her temporary home in São Paulo. Just as she was getting ready to leave São Paulo, somebody there got the bright idea that the rhino might be a good vote-getter. Stacks of printed ballots suddenly appeared with Cacareco's name on them. Cacareco slogans cropped up on São Paulo walls.

The zoo director in Rio, who knows Cacareco well, volunteered an honest political opinion: "She's an ugly beast," he said. "Very stupid. You could put her brain in a Brazil nut." This was precisely the point that the citizens of São Paulo wished to make: she still looked better to many of them than the candidates who were already running. The rhinoceros' name was written in on some 100,000 ballots—enough to swamp 11 opposition parties.

It was a stunning victory for Cacareco. The lady rhino's closest runner-up, a man, got a total of only 10,079 votes. Another defeated human candidate, infuriated and humiliated that he had been beaten at the polls by an animal, shot and killed himself.

The election board quickly disqualified the rhinoceros as a bona fide office holder and then tossed out her votes. She would never take the seat to which she was elected. Nonetheless the local politicians she defeated took their loss with bad grace. Some blamed the animal vote on "sinister forces" and "hidden interests."

Brazil's serious-minded office holders, from President Juscelino Kubitschek on down, were well aware that the rhino's victory was not just a joke. A lot of voters had registered a protest against the humans who were running their affairs and they would probably be heard from again. The candidate herself, thick-skinned and above the battle, was back in Rio, ready and available for future campaigns.

"It was just a spontaneous whim," cried one of the party leaders she had beaten, "a ridiculous vote for a ridiculous rhinoceros. Nowhere and never before have 100,000 literate adult voters cast their ballots for a silent, absent and nut-brained quadruped, *Diceros bicornis*."

GEORGE DE CARVALHO, TIME-LIFE Reporter



← **BIG WINNER**, rhino Cacareco is back in her zoo in Rio after being disqualified as a São Paulo alderman.