

The World blog **Manuela Carmena**

Madrid bemoans some very modern Magi

Tobias Buck JANUARY 6 2016

It is hard to escape politics in Spain these days, but the controversy sparked by Madrid's much-loved *Cabalgata de los Reyes* parade came as a surprise all the same.

Every year, on the night before the January 6 feast of Epiphany, the three kings make a triumphant entry into the Spanish capital, at the end of a vast procession that snakes its way down the Castellana boulevard. By tradition, the Cabalgata parade offers up a peculiar blend of the religious (the kings), the commercial (company-sponsored floats with popular cartoon figures), the military (the Spanish cavalry), the agricultural (geese) and the circus (elephants and camels).

Tens of thousands line the route, hoping to catch a glimpse of the kings – and to pick up their share of the thousands of kilos of sweets that are thrown into the crowd. For children, it is the highlight of Spain's festive calendar, made more exciting still by the knowledge that there is only one more night to go until they can unwrap their Christmas presents.

This year's Cabalgata, however, was subtly different. Madrid elected a new mayor last year, ending more than two decades of rule by the conservative Popular party. The new chief is [Manuela Carmena](#), a veteran left-wing judge and activist, who led an alliance of leftist groups to victory in May. Though not a member of Podemos, she is

a close ally of Spain's anti-austerity movement.

Most of the changes made to the Cabalgata seemed harmless enough, and some were probably long overdue. The role of Balthazar, for instance, was taken on this year by an actual black man, and not by a (white) member of the city council with his face painted black. There were no elephants, camels or geese taking part in Tuesday's parade – a nod to animal rights activists.

Instead, there were lots of bicycles, drum groups, a parade of trees, a homage to Mother Earth, a DJ truck and lots of dancers and musicians from Africa and the Arab world. Given the eclectic tradition of the parade, none of the novelties seemed especially out of place. Driving just ahead of the cavalry, the blinking DJ truck did seem strange – but not more so than the sight of Darth Vader marching down the Paseo de la Castellana surrounded by a selection of candy-throwing Imperial storm troopers. Arguably the most ideologically suspect trucks, those sponsored by private companies such as Coca-Cola, Disney and Danone, were part of the parade as always.

The first signs of protest, however, began to stir on social media even before the three kings had reached their destination. Some bemoaned the disappearance of beloved participants, others voiced dismay that the Cabalgata had been converted into a “multi-cultural carnival”.

The modernist dress of the three kings was another high-profile target. Some even accused the Madrid mayor of ruining the magic of Christmas for their children. Among them was Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, a prominent conservative, who tweeted with a touch of melodrama: “My 6-year old daughter: “Mama, the dress of Caspar

is not real.” I will never forgive you, Manuela Carmena. Never.”

Spain’s right-wing press picked up the theme on Wednesday. “Manuela Carmena dethrones the magic of the Reyes,” said the headline in La Razón. The ABC daily quoted a disappointed spectator saying: “A Cabalgata without camels is no Cabalgata.” Another described the parade as a “disgrace”, while the paper itself bemoaned that Madrid’s latest procession marked a further step towards the “de-sacrificiation” of a religious holiday.

It is tempting to shrug off this and similar controversies. But they do point to a serious political challenge faced by Spain’s new left. Last year, Podemos and its affiliates took power in the city halls of Madrid, Barcelona and a raft of other cities. Their votes are already required to prop up regional governments, and soon – quite possibly – the national government as well. The polemic surrounding the Cabalgata offers, in miniature, the broader dilemma faced by Podemos: how far can the movement push its agenda for social and political change without antagonizing mainstream voters? Is it worth dedicating political capital to red-button issues such as bull-fighting and religious processions, or should the new left-wing mayors focus on themes such as housing and poverty?

For Ms Carmena, at least, there seemed to be no such dilemma. In a dig at her critics, she tweeted on Wednesday: “The kings have brought me the opportunity to work for a more just and diverse Madrid. If I did anything else, they would never forgive me.”

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