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Argentina's Governing Party Suffers Significant Loss in Legislative Elections

by LADB Staff

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Argentina's governing Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) suffered its first defeat in ten years in legislative elections on Oct. 26. The defeat has shaken President Carlos Menem's administration, which faces a difficult final two years in office. Meanwhile, the opposition coalition Alianza por el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educacion has already begun closing ranks in anticipation of the 1999 presidential battle. In the election, in which half of the 257 seats in the Chamber of Deputies was at stake, the PJ lost its majority, dropping from 131 to 118 seats.

The Alianza, which includes the Union Civica Radical (UCR) and the Frente para un Pais Solidario (FREPASO), will hold 110 seats, up from 91, leaving the remaining 28 seats in the hands of smaller parties. The Alianza took 45.7% of the vote, compared to 36.2% for the PJ. The Alianza won its biggest victory in the capital of Buenos Aires, capturing 66% of the votes, compared with 16% for the PJ. The Alianza will also enjoy a majority in the first elected city legislature in Buenos Aires under UCR mayor Fernando de la Rúa.

In the key Buenos Aires province a longtime PJ stronghold and home to 37% of Argentina's 23 million voters the Alianza's Graciela Fernandez Meijide took 54% of the vote against 38% for the PJ's Hilda "Chiche" Gonzalez de Duhalde, wife of powerful provincial Gov. Eduardo Duhalde. Fernandez Meijide, a 66-year-old former French teacher, said she probably never would have entered politics if her 17-year-old son Pablo had not been "disappeared" by a military death squad 20 years ago.

Following his disappearance, Fernandez Meijide became a human rights activist, joining the National Commission on the Disappearance of People, which investigated crimes committed by the dictatorship. She did not join a political party until 1990, when she entered the movement that later became FREPASO. In 1993, she won a seat in the lower house, and in 1995 she was elected to the Senate with the most votes ever for a woman in Argentina. Her latest victory makes her a key player in the 1999 presidential elections.

Alianza says it will work to broaden its support base

Still savoring their triumph, five opposition leaders broadcast a victory statement that sounded more like the launching of a new campaign. "We need to broaden the Alianza's base to include lower-income sectors and business," said the UCR's Federico Storani. "Only by expanding our base will we be able to bring about the changes demanded by society." The strongest words against the PJ came from FREPASO's triumphant Buenos Aires candidate Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez. He said a select elite will no longer get rich at the cost of widespread poverty. He warned that "there are no longer invincible parties" in Argentina and the era of "omnipotence and arrogance is finished."

The Alianza victory will not mean major changes in economic policy since it endorsed the Menem administration's basic policy and pledged not to tamper with convertibility, the government plan that pegs the peso to the US dollar and is the engine of Argentina's economic recovery. Economic recovery's high social price tag affected voting. Following Menem's election in 1989, his administration reversed decades of economic decline, carrying out broad economic reforms that ended hyperinflation and led to sustained high levels of growth. However, recent polls showed that voters had become impatient with the social costs of the reforms and were ready for a change.

Analysts said election results showed that the PJ grossly underestimated the importance that voters placed on issues like unemployment, corruption, and a balance of power. Instead, it tried to scare voters into remaining with the party by predicting economic upheaval if the opposition won. "The party's over for those in power," said a government worker. "The leaders let down their guard and failed to recognize what everyone else saw: corruption, lack of separation between the executive and the judiciary, and incredible self-enrichment by people close to the president. Now they are paying for their blindness."

Argentines were also fed up with the perceived impunity of security forces and influential friends of the president. A symbol of such impunity hung from the microphone Fernandez Meijide used to deliver her victory speech: a photo of Jose Luis Cabezas, the photojournalist killed in January while investigating police corruption. Alfredo Yabran, a reclusive magnate and member of Menem's inner circle, has been questioned in connection with Cabezas's death. His security chief is charged with plotting the slaying.

The backlash against the government also contributed to former economy minister Domingo Cavallo's election to the Chamber of Deputies. Cavallo received 17% of the vote in the capital. The former minister heads a political party he started after Menem asked him to resign in 1995 following Cavallo's persistent accusations of government corruption. Administration's defeat likely to cause cabinet changes. Interior Minister Carlos Corach said the government will analyze the results with "absolute sincerity and serenity....We said the people were right when we won, and they are also right now that we have lost." Corach denied rumors of a possible Cabinet overhaul in the wake of the elections. However, Sen. Eduardo Menem, the president's brother, said changes would probably be made in a number of ministries. "We have to correct several aspects and improve others. This is the lesson the government must learn from these elections," he said.

Anticipating defeat, Menem recorded a message an hour before the polls closed saying, "The voice of the people is the voice of God." However, Menem refused to accept any responsibility for the loss, saying it was a defeat for the party, not for him. He said that, since he was not running in the elections, his unbeaten record still stands. Nevertheless, the results were a serious personal blow for the president, whose popularity has fallen sharply since he won a second presidential term in 1995. Analysts said the business community is concerned about the effect of the defeat on the administration and the struggle within the PJ to decide on a presidential candidate. "Menem needs to add fresh air to the Cabinet," said Alberto Alvarez Gaiani, head of COPAL, the food industry association, on Oct. 28.

A long campaign predicted for next presidential vote

The size of the Alianza victory has painted a new political panorama that has already plunged Argentina into a protracted campaign for the presidency in 1999, with the ruling party now forced to consider new hopefuls and opponents buoyed by their success. Fernandez Meijide's victory is a major obstacle for Gov. Duhalde, whose ambition was to succeed Menem in 1999. Duhalde lost the gamble he made when he ran his wife against Fernandez Meijide.

Gonzalez said clearly that she did not like politics and was only running to further the presidential aspirations of her husband. Duhalde accepted responsibility for the loss, saying he was the "father of the defeat," and called Fernandez Meijide's victory an "extraordinary triumph." He said the PJ must act immediately to recover the wide support it previously enjoyed. Duhalde's overwhelming support in previous polls made him the most likely PJ candidate for the 1999 elections, despite major differences with Menem.

However, chances have now improved considerably for former singer Ramon "Palito" Ortega and former race car driver Sen. Carlos Reuteman. Both men entered politics with Menem's encouragement and became governors of their native provinces in the north, Tucuman and Santa Fe, respectively. Ortega said that in light of the election results, there are no longer any "obvious" PJ candidates to succeed Menem. [Sources: CNN, 10/26/97; Associated Press, The Miami Herald, 10/25/97, 10/27/97; Spanish news service EFE, 10/26/97, 10/27/97; Agence France-Presse, The Washington Post, 10/27/97; Notimex, 10/27/97, 10/28/97; Clarin (Argentina), El Nuevo Herald, The New York Times, 10/28/97; Reuter, 10/23/97, 10/26/97, 10/27/97, 10/29/97]

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