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Argentine Ruling Party Divided Over Move to Let President Menem Run Again

by LADB Staff

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Associates of Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem are promoting a possible re-election bid by the president in 1999 for a third term. Division within the governing Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) regarding a Menem candidacy threatens to split the party and is hampering progress on economic and social issues. At this early stage, polls show little public support for another Menem term. Since early January, Menem's backers have increased their efforts to make his candidacy possible. In 1994, through a pact between Menem and former president Raul Alfonsin of the opposition Union Civica Radical (UCR), the Constitution was amended to allow presidential re-election for one consecutive term (see NotiSur, 09/02/94).

For Menem to run in 1999, another constitutional amendment would be necessary. The PJ, however, is deeply divided regarding its presidential candidate for the next elections. At a Jan. 27 meeting of 12 PJ governors with the president, the party primary was set for April 11. Earlier, the primary date was a bone of contention between the president and Buenos Aires Gov. Eduardo Duhalde, a candidate for the nomination. The governor wanted the primary early in the year to establish what he calls his "natural candidacy," while Menem's backers preferred to delay the primary to study the possibility of Menem's re-election or, if that failed, to allow time for the emergence of a candidate more acceptable to Menem.

Following the PJ's defeat in legislative elections last October, Duhalde has been less anxious to rush the date of the primary, wanting more time to rebuild his political base both within the PJ and in relation to the opposition Alianza, whose 1999 candidate will most likely be either Deputy Graciela Fernandez Meijide or Buenos Aires mayor Fernando de la Rúa. Duhalde has been the leading PJ contender to succeed Menem since before the president's re-election, and will not easily move aside for another candidate, even Menem. His standing in the party has suffered, however, since the October elections (see NotiSur, 10/31/97).

Meeting of PJ governors underscores party divisions

At the Jan. 27 meeting, the daily newspaper Clarin reported that three governors urged Menem to run again. Duhalde pointedly did not attend the meeting, and his absence was strongly criticized by other party leaders. "Whether we win the elections depends on the good job we do from now on," said Sen. Eduardo Bauza, a close advisor to Menem. "Duhalde must reflect on the fact that the Peronist party cannot be divided." The cool relations between Duhalde and the president are not new, but the talk of a "re-reelection" is intensifying their differences. The rancor within the party hampers PJ efforts to regain popular support. Duhalde recently said promoters of Menem's re-election should see a psychiatrist. He accused Menem of jeopardizing the party's chances in 1999 by not stopping efforts to promote his re-election, and said if the Supreme Court allows the president to run again, it will be a "judicial coup."

Recent polls put Menem's approval rating at its lowest since his first election in 1989. Some of Duhalde's aides and leaders of the Alianza have speculated publicly that the president would prefer to see the party lose in 1999, preserving his leadership in the party as a base to run again in 2003. Menem, who has already said he intends to run in 2003, has fueled that speculation with references to a possible Alianza victory. "The way things are going, I think I will be in some way the head of the opposition," he said. Menem had significant popular support when the Constitution was amended in 1994, since he was riding a wave of approval for economic policies that had cut the bottom out of inflation. Now, however, people are clamoring for less government corruption, a better justice system, greater security, and most of all, more jobs. Economists warn that party sparring is diverting energy and attention from urgent economic and political problems, including the 13.7% unemployment. The division is "paralyzing any attempt to approve structural reforms," said Daniel Artana of the economic consulting firm FIEL. "This has put us on auto-pilot because politicians are only thinking about 1999."

Menem's backers take case to courts

Among the moves to allow Menem to run again are several motions filed in the courts claiming that the ban on a third term violates the president's civil rights and also violates the San Jose Pact on civil rights, which Argentina signed. The legal measures are now before the Supreme Court (Corte Suprema de Justicia), which Menem's opponents say is stacked with pro-Menem judges. Two lower court judges recently ruled against the petitions. Menem allies are also arguing that Menem's first term was under the "old" Constitution, thus the limit to one re-election still gives him the right to run again.

In addition, supporters have called for a "nonbinding" referendum to let the people decide whether the constitutional limit should be eliminated. "Constitutions don't elect presidents, the people do," said Menem's chief of staff, Alberto Kohan. But opposition Deputy Gustavo Beliz, minister of the interior during Menem's first term, said a referendum would be calamitous for the president, given his lack of public support.

The Constitution requires congressional approval for a referendum, which is unlikely given the opposition control of Congress following the October elections. Re-election supporters are saying, however, that a referendum could be convoked by presidential decree citing "necessity and urgency." While Menem has said on several occasions that he does not intend to run again, neither he nor his Cabinet has done anything to stop his backers. Sen. Eduardo Menem, brother of the president, said he does not support the "re-reelection" because "the conditions aren't right" to change the Constitution again. "Neither would a nonbinding popular consultation make sense," he said, "because it would have no legal validity." [Sources: Notimex, 01/08/98, 01/15/98; Inter Press Service, 01/23/98; Reuter, 01/28/98; Clarin (Argentina), 01/07/98, 01/14/98, 01/21/98, 01/23/98, 01/28/98, 01/29/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/14/98, 01/21/98, 01/27/98, 01/29/98]

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