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Argentine Governing Party Names Presidential Candidate

by LADB Staff

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After months of infighting about the date of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) primary, the voting became unnecessary when Adolfo Rodriguez Saa withdrew from the race. Rodriguez's decision left Buenos Aires Gov. Eduardo Duhalde unopposed for the nomination. On June 18, the PJ's electoral commission proclaimed Duhalde the party's presidential candidate for the Oct. 24 elections, with Ramon "Palito" Ortega as his running mate. Six months ago, the opposition Alianza, comprising the Union Civica Radical (UCR) and the Frente Pais Solidario (FREPASO), chose Buenos Aires mayor Fernando de la Rúa and Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez as its candidates (see NotiSur, 1998-12-04).

The PJ primary was originally scheduled for April 11, then rescheduled for June 9. In early June, the PJ set the date for July 4. The delays were mostly maneuverings by supporters of President Carlos Saul Menem, who were trying to find a way around the constitutional prohibition against another term for the president. Menem unable to block Duhalde candidacy Duhalde has proclaimed himself the "natural" successor to Menem since the president's re-election in 1995.

The main stumbling block was Menem, who wanted another term, and, when that proved impossible, wanted anyone but Duhalde. Menem tried without success to convince former Formula One driver Sen. Carlos Reutemann to run (see NotiSur, 1999-02-19, 1999-03-19). After Reutemann said he would not run, Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, governor of the province of San Luis, was the only Peronist willing to take on Duhalde for the nomination, but he was unable to win the support of any major sectors of the party.

Unexpectedly, on June 7, Rodriguez Saa withdrew from the primary race, saying the party's electoral commission was not impartial. "I have made all possible efforts to run in the primary and they have closed all the roads on me," said Rodriguez Saa. "There is no voting list, there is no regulation, and the electoral commission is partial." Rodriguez Saa was apparently angered that the commission refused his request to postpone the elections. Although Menem was publicly supporting him, when he withdrew from the race, Rodriguez Saa denounced a Menem-Duhalde pact that prevented any other candidate from competing fairly. Third-party candidate could tip the scales Domingo Cavallo, a former economy minister running under his own conservative Accion por la Republica, could play a key role in a runoff.

On June 21, Duhalde said, should the presidential race go to a runoff, he would like to form an alliance with Cavallo. Under Argentine law, to win in the first round, a candidate must finish first with at least 45% of the vote or 40% together with a 10% point advantage over the second-place contender. "In a second round, you want to team up with the third force," Duhalde said. Duhalde is currently neck-and-neck with de la Rúa. A poll published June 18 awarded de la Rúa 36% of the vote and Duhalde 35%.

Since Menem was first elected in 1989, Argentina has overcome decades of hyperinflation with a policy of pegging the peso with the dollar. Economic growth has been generally good, but unemployment has more than doubled and the gap between rich and poor has increased. The Peronists have also been plagued by corruption scandals. The Alianza has promised to crack down on corruption, but says it will keep most of the Peronists' economic policies.

Candidate must walk fine line with president

The coming election is unique because the Peronist candidate is not the choice of the president. If he captures the top office, Duhalde would also be the first Buenos Aires provincial governor to do so. For the first time, on June 21 Menem publicly supported the Duhalde-Ortega ticket in a speech to the Council of the Americas in New York. "In addition to being president of Argentina, I am the president of the party," said Menem. "The party ticket is going to have all my support, totally and absolutely."

Menem said speculation, brought on by his open antipathy toward Duhalde, that he would prefer an Alianza victory was "absurd." Menem has talked about another run for the presidency in 2003, and analysts note that his ambition would be more difficult to realize with Duhalde in the presidential palace, especially should he want a second term. Considering his best chance of victory to be emphasizing his differences with the president, Duhalde has said he does not want Menem to participate in his electoral campaign.

Duhalde's economic team has promised to maintain the general terms of Menem's economic policies, but his campaign rhetoric has stressed his concern about social welfare, and he often says the economic model is "worn out." Duhalde set off a new confrontation with Menem by saying on July 5 that rich countries should go easy on Argentina, burdened by US\$100 billion in foreign debt, and enable it to fight poverty and crime. Although he repeated an early plea for rich nations to provide money to Argentina on easy terms, he added that he thought the debt must be paid. "It is ridiculous to think that I don't want to pay the debt," said Duhalde.

"Argentina is able to pay everything it owes and much more." Earlier he told a conference organized by the Argentine Banking Association that rich nations had a duty toward countries like Argentina that had undertaken major economic reforms but still suffered grave social problems. De la Rúa called Duhalde's remarks about the debt "irresponsible." Economists generally dismissed Duhalde's position as campaign rhetoric and said it would be almost impossible to renegotiate better terms for most of Argentina's debt, as it is largely held by bondholders. [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 06/02/99, 06/07/99; Notimex, 06/18/99; Associated Press, 06/07/99, 06/21/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 06/19/99, 06/24/99; Reuters, 06/07/99, 06/21/99, 06/25/99, 07/05/99; Clarin (Argentina), 06/08/99, 06/17/99, 06/19/99, 06/25/99, 07/05/99]

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