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## **Opposition Favored to Win Presidential Election in Argentina**

by LADB Staff

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Opposition Alianza candidate Fernando de la Rúa is favored to win the presidency in the Oct. 24 Argentine elections. The Alianza includes de la Rúa's Union Civica Radical (UCR) and the Frente del Pais Solidario (FREPASO). Buenos Aires Gov. Eduardo Duhalde, candidate for the governing Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ), has been hampered both by friction with President Carlos Saul Menem and by a widespread desire for change. After Menem failed to circumvent the constitutional prohibition on another term, he tried to block Duhalde from winning the party's nomination (see NotiSur, 1999-03-19, 1999-05-21, 1999-07-09).

Although he has endorsed Duhalde in the name of party unity, Menem's contribution to the campaign has been spotty and his support for Duhalde half-hearted. Some analysts say Menem would prefer a PJ defeat, which would make him the leading opposition figure and provide a platform from which to launch a new bid for the presidency.

Menem's former wife, Zulema Yoma, recently caused a political uproar by accusing Menem of hypocrisy in injecting abortion into the campaign. Yoma said Menem, recently honored by the Vatican for his stance against abortion, supported her decision to have an abortion in 1969 while they were married.

"It's time to stop the hypocrisy," said Yoma. "I am not saying she is lying, I am neither confirming nor denying what she said," Menem replied when asked about Yoma's remarks. "I am anti-abortion in principle, by conviction." Menem had urged voters to think carefully before voting for Buenos Aires "pro-abortion" gubernatorial candidate for the Alianza, Graciela Fernandez Meijide.

### ***Duhalde calls for a freeze on layoffs***

Trying to revive his campaign, Duhalde called on businesses to suspend all layoffs for at least a year. Argentina needs "a real shock in work and in industrial production," said Duhalde. "But the business sector must promise to suspend all layoffs for a year. That is how long we need to beat this crisis."

With unemployment at 14.5%, jobs have consistently been one of Argentines' top concerns in polls, along with crime and corruption. High unemployment is partly the result of privatization of state companies under Menem but has been aggravated by a serious economic contraction.

The government expects GDP to fall 3% this year. "We want business owners to see their businesses prosper," said Duhalde. "But we want workers to enjoy watching their children grow up in a country that educates them and gives them a future." Duhalde has also questioned the policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and said if he is elected he will not accept them.

The IMF "has systematically erred in all the countries in which it has intervened with its prescriptions," he said. "We are not slaves and we do not have a dependency where we have to accept everything an international organization wants to impose on us."

### *Alianza's de la Rúa makes blandness a virtue*

Front-runner de La Rúa has a reputation for honesty and predictability but with a certain reserve. The most frequent criticism about his record as Buenos Aires mayor is that he can be indecisive. Supporters say after 10 years of Menem's flamboyance, de La Rúa's blandness is in his favor. "There is a generalized exhaustion with Menem's frivolous behavior," says Jesus Rodriguez, secretary general of the UCR. "We will go from a strong presidency to a strong government: more power to institutions, less power for individuals."

De La Rúa has a long history with the UCR, considered a centrist party on Argentina's political spectrum. He was elected to the Senate in 1983, led the UCR bloc in Congress in 1991, and was re-elected a year later. He was elected mayor of Buenos Aires in 1996. "The people want a change of government, but not a fundamental change in policies," said Manuel Mora y Araujo, an independent political consultant. "De la Rúa is saying, 'Have confidence in me,' and that's what people want confidence."

While de la Rúa said he would abandon Menem's "automatic alignment" with the US, that would not mean an "automatic disalignment" with Washington. "My obsession is creating jobs," he said, promising to bring down the unemployment rate by subsidizing debt interest payments of small and medium-size businesses so they can employ more people. He said he would reduce the government deficit by cutting waste and graft, and increase tax receipts by prosecuting evaders. Such policies, he said, would increase the confidence of foreign investors and lower interest rates.

De la Rúa will not change the monetary policy put in place by Menem of pegging the peso to the dollar. The Alianza said on Sept. 24 that one of the first things it will do if it wins the elections will be to expel Paraguayan exile Gen. Lino Oviedo (see NotiSur, 1999-09-17). "If he is still here in Argentina on Dec. 10, on Dec. 11 he will leave," promised de la Rúa. "In my government, Argentina will not be a refuge for coup leaders who, in addition, violate the basic rules of asylum." Cavallo could be key figure in next government. Meanwhile, former economy minister Domingo Cavallo is running a distant third in the race.

Although he stands almost no chance of winning, with 9% support in the polls, Cavallo's Accion por la Republica party could win a significant bloc of congressional seats. That could make Cavallo, now a senator, a key player in Congress especially in economic policy, no matter who is elected Oct. 24. Cavallo is receiving significant media attention, in large part because he was the most important member of Menem's Cabinet during his first term.

As Menem's first foreign minister, Cavallo restored ties with Britain, which were suspended in the 1982 Malvinas/Falklands War. As economy minister, he designed the plan that pegged the value of the peso to the dollar. He was forced to resign in 1996, after describing to Congress an expanding web of organized crime with links to the highest levels of the government (see NotiSur, 1996-08-02).

### *Polls give de la Rúa comfortable lead*

As the provincial electoral calendar, which began last December, comes to an end, the PJ has won the governorships of 11 provinces, the Alianza won in 4 provinces, and the local Movimiento Popular Neuquino (MPN) won in the province of Neuquen. Six provinces, including Buenos Aires, will elect provincial officials in the Oct. 24 general elections. With three weeks until the elections, the polls give de la Rúa as much as a 19-point advantage over Duhalde, and predict he will take at least 45% of the votes to win on the first ballot.

"Only a big mistake by de la Rúa or a brilliant move by Duhalde could lose him the election," said political analyst Mariano Grondona. "De la Rúa is sitting back and relaxing, which is what his advisors are telling him to do." [Sources: Clarin (Argentina), 09/17/99; Reuters, 09/18/99, 09/20/99, 09/23/99; CNN, The New York Times, 09/16/99, 09/26/99; The Miami Herald, 09/23/99, 09/27/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/24/99, 09/27/99; Notimex, 09/27/99]

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