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Opposition Candidate Fernando de La Rúa Wins Argentine Presidential Election

by LADB Staff

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Fernando de la Rúa, candidate for the opposition Alianza coalition, won an impressive victory in Argentina's Oct. 24 general elections. De la Rúa's defeat of governing Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) candidate Eduardo Duhalde ends ten years of PJ rule. De la Rúa pledged to remedy social and moral ills that include a high jobless rate, a widening gap between rich and poor, and widespread corruption. The 62-year-old Buenos Aires mayor took 48.5% of the vote against Duhalde's 38%, eliminating the need for a runoff election. Former economy minister Domingo Cavallo came in third, with just over 10% of the vote.

"You have elected a president who will put an end to privilege, especially the privilege of power," said de la Rúa, addressing the nation's 36 million people. "Let's remember the humble, the unprotected, and the need for policies to care for them. Such inequality and exclusion is immoral, and we must bring about a moral change in Argentina." De la Rúa failed in a vice presidential bid in 1973 and a bid to be the presidential candidate for the Union Civica Radical (UCR) in 1983. He became the first elected mayor of the capital in 1996.

The Alianza victory means that Argentina will have a coalition government for the first time. The Alianza, which includes the UCR and the Frente del País Solidario (FREPASO), was created in 1997 and won a resounding victory in legislative elections that same year. De la Rúa's running mate, vice president-elect Carlos "Chacho" Alvarez, belongs to FREPASO.

Divided Congress will necessitate consensus

De la Rúa is a sharp contrast to the flamboyant outgoing president, Carlos Saul Menem, who often governed by decree. De la Rúa's approach is much more to look for consensus, which will be important in the new political climate.

The PJ still controls the Senate, a third of the Chamber of Deputies, and two-thirds of the 24 provinces, whose governors exert strong influence on Congress and on spending programs. In addition to the presidency, 116 of the 257 seats in the lower house were at stake in the elections.

The Alianza is expected to have 124 deputies and the PJ 98. As the third political force in the country, Cavallo's Accion por la Republica (AR) will have 11 seats. The PJ remains Argentina's strongest single party and will retain control of the Senate at least until 2001. "Argentina will see a new style of government where negotiating accords and building consensus will be the rules of the game," said political analyst Graciela Romer.

In the important race to succeed Duhalde as governor of Buenos Aires province, Vice President Carlos Ruckauf defeated Graciela Fernandez Meijide of the Alianza. The province has long been a

PJ stronghold and is home to a third of the nation's population. The governorship is the country's second-most powerful political post. Fernandez Meijide's defeat leaves FREPASO with no high-profile post except the vice presidency. The party came in second in national elections four years ago with 35% of the vote. "De la Rúa's votes come partly from the UCR but also in large part from FREPASO, which cleaned up the UCR's image," said analyst Felipe Noguera. "A big challenge for de la Rúa will be to act like an Alianza president, and not as a UCR president."

Voters call for moderate change

An important campaign issue was preserving the economic stability achieved under Menem. While voters' chief concern a decade ago was runaway inflation that peaked at an annual rate of over 3,000%, 75% of voters last week feared that a drastic change could make things worse, according to the polling firm Mora y Araujo. Instead of drastic change, voters sought change with stability.

While promising an emphasis on social programs, de la Rúa has vowed to maintain key elements of Menem's economic policy, including the fixed-currency system put in place in 1991, which pegs the peso to the US dollar. But de la Rúa's promises to reduce the 14.5% unemployment rate and poverty 45% of children under 14 live in poverty will be hard to fulfill in the current economic climate.

Argentina is in its worst recession in a decade. The economy is expected to shrink 3% this year, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is calling for major spending cuts in 2000 to reduce the budget deficit. Analysts see the voters' choice as a call for fiscal sobriety, despite the painful recession, which should help de la Rúa, at least in the short term. Another help could be Menem's budget proposal, which calls for cuts the Alianza could not have proposed during an election campaign.

In September, Economy Minister Roque Fernandez presented the draft 2000 budget, which included a 3.5% cut in public spending to reduce the fiscal deficit to US\$4.5 billion. The proposed cuts included a public-housing program and unemployment assistance, which met opposition from both Peronists and the Alianza. It would help de la Rúa if Congress were to pass the budget before he assumes office.

Analysts agree that the economy needs spending cuts and tax hikes, but also programs to help the country's 13 million poor. Unemployment has been climbing since 1994. During Menem's first term, the lives of the poor improved some because of the newfound economic stability, but that soon changed for those living at or below the poverty line. And many in the middle class have become Argentina's "new poor" during the past decade. Despite Menem's pledge to fund health services, education, justice, and security programs with revenues from privatizations, those resources were not directed toward social programs. Most of the US\$25 billion earned from the sale of public enterprises is gone with little to show for it.

Relationship with the US likely to change

In a recent interview, de la Rúa said he would end Menem's "automatic alignment with the US," without turning to "automatic disalignment." "We are going to continue our friendship with the US, but based on mutual respect," de la Rúa said. "We want a foreign policy that is more open to the world, to Europe and Asia as well, [but] this is not going to affect our friendship with the US."

Other areas of Menem's foreign policy where de la Rúa has said he will make changes are in demanding more US trade concessions and giving greater priority to strengthening the troubled MERCOSUR trading bloc, made up of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay. De la Rúa also said he will no longer send troops on multilateral military missions. Duhalde blames Menem for defeat After trying unsuccessfully to circumvent the constitutional ban on a third term, Menem only half-heartedly supported Duhalde's campaign.

Duhalde blamed Menem for the PJ loss, saying the president was more concerned with laying the foundation to run again in 2003 than in contributing to a PJ victory in this election (see NotiSur, 1999-10-01). Menem refused to accept any blame for Duhalde's defeat. "If I had been the candidate, I would have won easily," he said. Menem said the negative vote was "against those who rejected the model that we put in place in 1989," referring to Duhalde's call for changing the economic model, which he called "used up."

Menem wasted no time in focusing on his pledge to run again in 2003. The day after the elections, workers in several Buenos Aires neighborhoods were putting up signs with Menem's photograph and the slogan, "Menem 2003. Let's take good care of him. The nation needs him." The same day, the daily newspaper La Nación reported that a dinner has been scheduled for Dec. 5 for Menem to formally launch his 2003 campaign. [Sources: Associated Press, CNN, Inter Press Service, Reuters, 10/25/99; Clarin (Argentina), Spanish news service EFE, 10/25/99, 10/26/99; The Buenos Aires Herald (Argentina), Financial Times (London), The Miami Herald, The New York Times, 10/26/99]

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