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Nestor Kirchner is President-elect

by LADB Staff

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Just four days before Argentina's May 18 presidential runoff, former President Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999) withdrew from the race, making Santa Cruz Gov. Nestor Kirchner president-elect by default. Both Menem and Kirchner belong to the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ). Kirchner will begin his four-year term May 25. Argentina's electoral law provides that, if a presidential candidate pulls out of a runoff election, the Congress automatically declares the other candidate the winner. The 72-year-old Menem quit rather than face the humiliation of a defeat that polls indicated would be by as much as 40 percentage points. But his withdrawal also ensured that Kirchner would take office without the strength he would have gained from an overwhelming electoral victory.

"He could have become president with the largest vote in the history of Argentina," said political analyst Rosendo Fraga. "Now, Kirchner will be inaugurated with the smallest vote ever. It is hugely damaging, and it will be difficult for him to govern on his own." It also thwarted the purpose of the election, which was to install an elected president to replace the caretaker government of President Eduardo Duhalde. Duhalde had moved the election forward by six months (see NotiSur, 2002-07-12).

Thanks to Menem, "for 24 hours the country has lived in suspense, with its democratic institutions rendered powerless," Kirchner said when Menem withdrew. "He has shown his true face at last that of cowardice and made his last gesture, which is to flee."

On May 14, the daily newspaper Clarin reported that those close to Menem had attempted, unsuccessfully, to negotiate with Duhalde and Kirchner terms for Menem staying in the race. He would stay and allow Kirchner to win in a landslide, the report said, if Kirchner agreed to keep Menem's allies in key government positions. In remarks later that day, Kirchner said, "I have not come this far to make deals with the past." He described Menem's two days of keeping the entire country speculating on whether he would pull out as "humiliating and disgraceful."

When he finally made his move, Menem blamed Duhalde. "It is the electoral sabotage directed by Duhalde, which went against the law of democracy. This had become a total sham election, and we could not submit the people to it," said Menem. Before a group of supporters, Menem said Kirchner "can keep his 22%, I have the people." Menem unable to overcome huge antipathy factor In the official results of the April 27 first round, published by the Camara Nacional Electoral (CNE) on May 11, Menem finished first with 24.45% of the votes, while Kirchner received 22.24% (see NotiSur, 2003-05-02). It had become apparent, however, that Menem's level of support in the first-round was about the maximum he could expect in the runoff.

A poll by the Equis polling firm released May 7 showed Kirchner with 58.5% support compared with 21.7% for Menem. The survey of 3,110 people in 12 cities had a margin of error of 1.7%. The poll showed that more than 50% of the potential voters were motivated to cast anti-Menem votes.

They held him responsible for the economic disaster and were unwilling to overlook the rampant corruption and scandals involving close associates that marked his two terms.

A Los Angeles Times editorial quoted an Argentine historian as saying that Menem "is the man who invited everyone to the party, lived it up, and then left without picking the tab." The former president had little success with his campaign strategy of trying to convince voters that Kirchner would bring a government similar to Cuba's. "Cuba or Spain, you choose," was how Menem described the choice between governmental models. "There are two options: peace, security, development and growth for Argentina, or an Argentina similar to Cuba." After Menem's withdrawal, Fraga said the former president might continue to play a role as an important reference point on the national political scene, "but not as a leader, and much less as an option" for political power.

Pollster Analia del Franco said bluntly, "There is no possible comeback from making a total fool of yourself," referring to Menem's repeated declarations that he would take part in the runoff, only to drop out after two days of rumors and wavering.

Kirchner uses relative obscurity to advantage

Kirchner's recent emergence on the national political scene was a definite advantage. "He is a total unknown, and by being an unknown, he can play the role of a newcomer to politics," said pollster Manuel Mora y Araujo. "In Argentina, those who have many years of experience in national politics also tend to have a very bad image." Kirchner was elected mayor of Rio Gallegos, capital of Santa Cruz province, in 1987 and provincial governor four years later. He then amended the provincial constitution to allow for unlimited re-elections and was twice returned to office.

In Santa Cruz, Kirchner was considered an effective administrator. The oil-rich province of 200,000 people has the lowest unemployment rate and the fewest poor residents in Argentina. But a report earlier this year in La Nacion newspaper portrayed Kirchner as an authoritarian leader who awarded government jobs to supporters 50% of the people in Rio Gallegos are on the public payroll. "Kirchner is a mix of provincial caudillo, social progressive, and economic conservative," said La Nacion political editor Martin Dinatale. "He runs this province as if it were a country estate," said a prominent Santa Cruz lawyer.

Responding to the press reports of authoritarianism in Santa Cruz, Kirchner's campaign manager Alberto Fernandez said, "Argentina needs a president who knows how to wield power." Kirchner promises to fight poverty and unemployment Kirchner's challenges will include renegotiating Argentina's foreign debt, including a large portion on which it has ceased payments, reducing the nearly 60% poverty rate, and cutting unemployment, which affects nearly 25% of workers. In a recent TV interview, Kirchner said that, just as Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's main focus was "zero hunger," the center of his policies would be "fighting extreme poverty and unemployment."

As president, Kirchner plans to spend money on public- works projects and build 3 million homes in four years, which he predicts will create 5 million jobs. Duhalde helped improve regional trade,

notably with Brazil, which Kirchner says he will continue. He is expected to work to strengthen ties within MERCOSUR, the regional trade pact that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with Chile and Bolivia as associate members. He has already traveled to Brazil and Chile to meet the presidents of those countries.

Kirchner's support for a stronger MERCOSUR could come at the expense of the US-promoted hemispheric Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). "It is clear that on the foreign policy front, Kirchner is going to cast his lot with the MERCOSUR," the director of the Institute of Brazilian Studies in Argentina, Alberto Ferrari Etcheberry, told Inter Press Service.

Kirchner names Cabinet

Before the April election, Kirchner announced that he would keep current Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna in his post. Lavagna, who has held that position for a little over a year, is credited with stabilizing prices, curbing the devaluation of the peso, implementing a work-fare program for unemployed heads of households, and negotiating an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With respect to the FTAA, Lavagna favors postponing the target date of 2005. The agreement "may or may not" be ready by that date, he said. "There are many differences among the 34 countries that would take part in the FTAA," Lavagna said, adding that moving toward free trade with economies that are "heavily protected and subsidized," as is the US agriculture sector, is not an easy task.

On May 20, Kirchner named the rest of his 13-member Cabinet, which included four people from Duhalde's outgoing government and four from his own provincial administration. Lavagna's power was expanded with the incorporation of the Production Ministry into his portfolio. Kirchner created a Ministry for Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services, signaling the importance he will place on state-sponsored public-works programs.

Heading the new ministry will be Julio de Vido, who held a similar post in the state government in Santa Cruz. Besides Lavagna, Kirchner retained current Production Minister Anibal Fernandez, Secretary General of the Presidency Jose Pampuro, and Health Minister Gines Gonzalez Garcia from the Duhalde administration.

Fernandez was named interior minister, Pampuro defense minister, and Gonzalez Garcia will remain in her post as health minister. Kirchner named constitutional expert Rafael Bielsa as his foreign minister. One of his main tasks will be to revive the MERCOSUR trade bloc.

Kirchner's sister, Alicia Kirchner, will take over as social development minister. Daniel Filmus was named minister of education and culture, Gustavo Beliz minister of justice and human rights, and Carlos Tomada, minister of labor, employment, and social security.

Oscar Parrilli will be secretary general of the presidency and Sergio Acevedo will head state intelligence (Secretaria de Inteligencia del Estado, SIDE). Alberto Fernandez will be Cabinet chief.

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