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Legislative elections in Argentina on Oct. 23 resulted in a large win for President Nestor Kirchner's wing of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ). His wife, Cristina Fernandez, overwhelmingly won a Senate race against Hilda "Chiche" Duhalde, wife of former President Eduardo Duhalde (2001-2003). Beyond that, Kirchner's allies significantly increased their presence in the Congress, although they will not constitute a legislative majority in the lower house. The center-right won its own victory with the triumph of businessman Mauricio Macri of the Propuesta Republicana (PRO), but former President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) experienced his first loss in an election.

"Plebiscite" on performance goes Kirchner's way

The win by Kirchner's faction was the first real affirmation of the president at the ballot box since he rose from a relatively unknown governor from the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz. He won just over 22% of the vote in the first round of voting in the 2003 presidential election, while former President Menem took slightly over 24% of the vote.

Polls showed that Kirchner would overwhelmingly win the second round, and Menem pulled out of the race so he would not have to take a loss at the ballot box, something he had yet to do (see NotiSur, 2003-05-23). While he was poised to receive a mandate at the polls, when Menem pulled out of the race, Kirchner entered office with a small percentage of votes and apparent political weakness. Prior to the Oct. 23 vote, Kirchner portrayed it as a plebiscite on his performance.

At that point in the campaign, it was clear that many races were going his way. His candidates won 21 Senate seats, earning Kirchner a comfortable majority in the upper house. In the 257-seat lower house, they will form by far the largest bloc, although he will have to make deals with competitor PJ factions or the opposition to secure a legislative majority. His bloc holds 115 seats, just shy of the 129 seats necessary for an absolute majority. The elections contested 24 of 72 Senate seats and 127 of the 256 House seats. Some 26 million Argentines were registered to vote and the Interior Ministry reported that 82% of them went to the polls.

Talk of Fernandez for president in 2007

The most watched race was between Fernandez and Duhalde. Fernandez, 52, has been a senator for the province of Santa Cruz since 1995. Fernandez ran against Chiche Duhalde, Martha Maffei of the Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales (ARI), Luis Brandoni of the Union Civica Radical (UCR), and PRO candidate Ricardo Lopez Murphy, the former economy minister for a brief period in 2001. Maffei, Brandoni, and Lopez Murphy each took less than 10% of the vote, while Duhalde came in 26 percentage points behind Fernandez. Fernandez ended up with 46% of the vote, Duhalde with 19.7%. As first- and second-place finishers in the battle for three seats from Buenos Aires province, both Fernandez and Duhalde will take seats in the Senate in December.
Politicians in the Congress as well as the Kirchner administration will have to face problems that include a jobless rate of 12%, poverty of almost 40%, and increasing inflation rates.

Born in La Plata, the capital of Buenos Aires province, Fernandez began her political career as a militant in the PJ in the 1970s. A lawyer, she has served in both the Senate and lower house representing Santa Cruz. The decision to run in Buenos Aires province was something of a gamble for the Kirchner camp, but, since it is home to about 40% of Argentina's population, the potential political rewards were extremely high.

Fernandez evokes the style of Eva Peron, wife of the late Argentine head of state and PJ founder Juan Domingo Peron (1946-1951, 1951-1955, 1973-1974), from punctuated speech patterns to an aggressive defense of her husband's center-left policies to actions that have included boycotting gas companies when they threatened to raise prices and opposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) influence (see NotiSur, 2005-03-11, 2005-04-15). Still, when Kirchner was elected president, his wife rejected the title of first lady for that of first citizen. She declined to stand at his side when he was sworn in before the legislature and watched from the floor with the other senators.

Fernandez's overwhelming victory in the Senate race had her allies talking about her potential as a "presidenciable" or viable presidential candidate in 2007, although they said such talk was "very premature." It also brought up speculation regarding favorable conditions for her husband's potential efforts for re-election two years from now.

**Another win for the South American left**

The political and economic outlook favored Kirchner heavily in the lead-up to the vote. The economy has grown 7.5% this year after two previous years where the GDP went up by 9%. Unemployment fell from 21% to 13% while poverty rates declined from 55% to 38%. Kirchner successfully restructured a large portion of Argentina's foreign debt, and official numbers indicate that there has been a slight decline in crime rates, although mass protests over kidnappings and criminal activity have posed a major challenge to Kirchner's presidency.

Opinion polls have put Kirchner's approval rating at higher than 75% of the population, though this was the first electoral proof that his nationalist style of governing was winning large numbers of adherents. The Index of Confidence in the Government, released monthly by the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, showed a 4% increase in October. The victory also strengthened Kirchner just as 33 leaders from around the hemisphere readied travel plans to attend the IV Summit of the Americas set for the first week of November in Mar del Plata, in Buenos Aires province.

On a continental scale, the win for Kirchner consolidated another left-wing government in a South American political climate that has favored Kirchner and Presidents Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil. The old bearers of neoliberal and privatization-friendly economic policy like Menem and Duhalde were generally losers in the election, although the center-right was not annihilated.
PRO candidate Mauricio Macri, a businessman who runs Argentina's most popular soccer club, Boca Juniors, was the brightest star for conservatives. Macri won the race for the lower house in Buenos Aires, with a margin of a dozen percentage points over Elisa Carrio, a left-leaning lawyer, and Rafael Bielsa, Kirchner's foreign minister. Macri will now dispute the leadership of the center-right with Jorge Sobisch, the governor of Neuquen province. Carrio was hurt by a scandal invented by the government, she claimed concerning foreign bank accounts, but her party picked up three seats in the lower house.

"We want to change the way of doing politics," the Argentine daily newspaper La Nacion quoted Macri as saying. "The opposition has to demonstrate to the people that it's an alternative for Argentina to move forward." While elections showed Kirchner flexing new political muscle, Macri or any other challenger will have to work quickly to spread an alternative message if the opposition hopes to seriously contest presidential elections in 2007, analysts said.

Argentina's other traditional opposition force, the Union Civica Radical (UCR), has been in complete disarray since the deep economic crisis of 2001-2002, and other opponents of Peronism remain divided among minor parties. "Clearly, Macri has established himself as the opposition in the city," said Riordan Roett, director of the Western Hemisphere program at Johns Hopkins University in the US. The hectic campaign season, marked by party infighting and an overwhelming number of candidates, signaled a return to business as usual in a country that shunned traditional politicking after the 2001 economic crisis, according to some political analysts.

"Argentina...suspended politics for about two years after the crisis," said political consultant Felipe Noguera. "This election...should be weighed in terms of a return to normality, of picking up the pieces and trying to put them together again." There were accusations between the Duhaldistas and the Kirchneristas of "clintelismo," or distributing household appliances, favors, and other gifts in exchange for votes.

"Menemism has ended"

Carlos Menem suffered his first-ever defeat at the polls when the Kichnerist Partido de la Victoria (PV) propelled its candidate, Gov. Angel Maza, to a 51% win in Menem's La Rioja province. Menem only took 40.5% of the vote, but, thanks to the vicissitudes of the Argentine electoral system, he will still take a seat in the Congress. The system allows three senators per district, so losers can still ascend to power. Nonetheless, Menem's style of governance and economic policies, for now at least, appear to be in complete disrepute.

Chilean newspaper El Mercurio reported that an unnamed Peronist source said that the 75-year-old Menem "is finished, what do you want me to say?" The paper said the source was a high-ranking member of the party. After Kirchner's big win, the Duhalde wing of the PJ was also said to be in decline, though many of its candidates still hold power. Menem's first loss in a 43-year political career deprived him of "ownership" of a district branch of the PJ.

Analysts like Heriberto Mauri say that Menem will now be just another face in the Congress unless he manages to ally himself with rising stars like Macri and disassociate himself with the errors and
abuses of his presidency. "Unless an absolute disaster happens with Kirchner, there is no return for Menem," said Mauri. So far, Menem has managed to avoid prosecution for alleged corruption and crimes that occurred during his presidency, but investigations into illegal arms smuggling to Ecuador in the 1990s continue to hang over him (see NotiSur, 2004-04-30 and 2005-04-08).

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