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## Mayor of Buenos Aires Impeached

by LADB Staff

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Anibal Ibarra, the mayor of Buenos Aires and key ally of President Nestor Kirchner, has been impeached and faces political trial for a lethal fire that led to the deaths of 194 youths at a nightclub on Dec. 30, 2004. Prosecutors allege that the city, under Ibarra's leadership, did not have centralized coordination and was therefore responsible for the deaths, while family members have long demanded his removal for allowing lax enforcement of fire codes. Ibarra claims that the attempt to unseat him has political rather than legal motivations, with his supporters calling the political trial "an institutional coup."

### *Family members demand punishment*

Family members of the dead and injured have been demanding Ibarra's resignation since January 2005, days after it became evident that lax fire-code enforcement was a major factor in the deadly blaze, one of Argentina's worst disasters. The fire occurred at a packed concert the night before New Year's Eve at a club called Republica Cromanon, during a concert promoted by businessman and club owner Omar Chaban. The band Los Callejeros was performing to a crowd of thousands of youths that hot summer night. Cromanon was crowded well in excess of the legal capacity of 1,500.

The use of flares in the closed space led to a blaze in which nearly 200, many of them teenagers, were asphyxiated or burned to death and more than 700 others were injured. Several days of pot-banging protest marches followed the blaze. The mayor was quick to reject charges by the marchers, who included family members carrying photographs of their children, that municipal corruption had allowed the clubs to remain open without adequate security protections in place. Ibarra ordered city clubs closed for two weeks of safety inspections and banned indoor concerts indefinitely.

On Jan. 1, 2005, Ibarra told La Nacion newspaper that Republica Cromanon was inspected by firefighters in April 2004. In the interview, he charged that any addition of flammable materials to the club's acoustic ceiling, which witnesses said caught fire after someone fired a flare into it, came after that certification. Investigators and survivors charged that exits were blocked or locked. Firings and investigations of municipal authorities followed, but were not adequate to protect Ibarra politically.

Two Buenos Aires officials stepped down after accepting responsibility for inadequate safety measures. But some groups wanted Ibarra to resign, accusing him of misadministration, the charge that ultimately led to his suspension. Ibarra refused to quit, saying that the fire brigade was responsible for such safety issues in Buenos Aires and that it had approved the nightclub. He has also blamed the club's owner, Chaban. An Argentine judge has charged Chaban with manslaughter. He faces up to 25 years in prison. Callejeros band members also face manslaughter charges for not securing the venue adequately.

On Dec. 22, three city officials had manslaughter charges dropped but must still face trial for failure to discharge their duties. Impeachment hearings chaotic The rage of the victims' families has been a vivid presence on the Buenos Aires political and judicial scene. Crowds of survivors have protested against Ibarra, Chaban, and the Callejeros, with angry family members physically attacking Chaban in mid-2005 when he was released on bond. Police protection failed to keep a group of aggrieved individuals from knocking the former club owner to the ground.

When Chaban stayed at his mother's apartment, large groups of demonstrators protested loudly outside the building. He was later returned to prison after his bond was revoked. During the impeachment hearings against Ibarra, protesters swarmed into the Buenos Aires city legislature early on Nov. 11 and blocked lawmakers from voting on whether to seek Ibarra's impeachment.

Dozens of families and friends of victims began brawling with police and forced lawmakers to curtail a tense debate that began late the previous day and went into early Nov. 11. The session on whether to seek an impeachment vote was postponed until Nov. 14. "Justice! Justice!" demonstrators shouted as some ripped the legs off chairs and hurled them at police. Others shouted insults at fleeing lawmakers and threw shredded paper around the chamber like confetti.

On Nov. 14, police sealed off the city legislature to prevent victims' relatives from entering the building. This time only 10 representatives of the relatives were allowed in the building, an official said. That morning, dozens of people had already gathered outside as councilors prepared to resume the voting session later in the afternoon. The Nov. 14 vote impeached the mayor and sent him to trial by a margin of 30 to 7 with 6 abstentions. The impeachment required at least 29 votes. The mass of victims' groups and family members waiting outside cheered the vote with embraces and shouts of victory. Vice mayor Jorge Telerman took Ibarra's seat following the vote.

Ibarra has characterized his impeachment as a political lynching organized by his opponents. The day of the vote, Ibarra called the proceeding a parody. "I am not going to resign," Ibarra told his supporters on Nov. 14. "Justice cannot be reached with political revenge, through manipulation and opportunism." Ibarra and his supporters allege that federal Deputy Mauricio Macri of the Propuesta Republicana (PRO) is leading the effort to get revenge for Ibarra's 2003 win against the center-right businessman.

Macri came out of legislative elections in October 2005 as the most prominent opposition figure in an election that was marked by the triumph of many of Kirchner's Partido Justicialista (PJ) allies (see NotiSur, 2005-11-14). The mayoralty of Buenos Aires is arguably the second-most-prominent political office in Argentina, next to the presidency, somewhat like the mayoralty of Mexico City in Mexico. The city is home to the most concentrated bloc of the country's voters and serves as the nation's economic, political, and cultural center. Buenos Aires' centrality makes the fight over Ibarra's political fate particularly fierce.

### *Judging tribunal may be likely to vote against mayor*

The Sala Juzgadora, or judging tribunal, that Ibarra faces is a body of political party officials with a majority that seems to be leaning against him. The tribunal is composed of 15 legislative deputies

and is currently taking testimony from the prosecution and defense. There are three Kirchnerist members of the board who, under orders from President Kirchner, intend to vote in Ibarra's favor and four Macrista votes solidly against him, according to newspaper reports in Argentine daily Clarin.

The party Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales (ARI) says its two deputies have freedom of conscience to vote as they see fit, but apparently ARI leaders were not accepting phone calls from pro-Ibarra supplicants on Jan. 22, which Clarin took as a bad sign for Ibarra. The remaining deputies come from the Union Civica Radical (UCR) and other parties, including two leftists and a socialist party member. The body soundly rejected a motion by Ibarra's defense to nullify the proceedings after they began on Jan. 17 with a vote of 12 to two with one abstention.

Testimony from witnesses alleging Ibarra's culpability then began. The body must give a verdict by March 14, with 10 votes being the necessary minimum to depose the mayor. If he is not removed from office or the body does not hand down a decision before March 14, Ibarra would return to office and serve until the end of his elected term in 2007.

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