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LADB Staff

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Trial Removes Mayor of Buenos Aires

by LADB Staff

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Buenos Aires Mayor Anibal Ibarra has been removed from office after exactly two-thirds of the Sala Juzgadora, the legislative judicial council set up to conduct a political trial, voted against him. The body of city deputies found him culpable for lapses in municipal control leading to a Dec. 30, 2004, nightclub fire that killed 194 people. Ibarra characterized the decision as "an institutional coup" orchestrated by his political enemies, while a majority of family members of the deceased celebrated the decision to remove him.

Ibarra will try to overturn decision in the courts

The vote was a major fall for Ibarra, a 48-year-old center-left politician who had been one of Argentina's rising stars and a key ally of President Nestor Kirchner. Ibarra is the first mayor to be removed in the history of the city. Since the pre-New Year fire at the Republica Cromanon nightclub during a concert by the rock band Callejeros, there have been increasing calls for Ibarra's resignation or removal (see NotiSur, 2006-01-27). While the relatives of the victims started the movement, support from Ibarra's opponents gave it political momentum. Conservative Federal Deputy Mauricio Macri of Propuesta Republicana (PRO), the nation's top opposition leader to Kirchner and his allies, criticized Ibarra's handling of corruption among municipal enforcement agencies, although he denied the "institutional coup" allegation.

Another opposition leader, Elisa Carrio of the Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales (ARI), pointed to the majority in the Sala Juzgadora as a fact that "destroys the thesis of a 'coup.'" Considering the removal to be "a historic step," Carrio said that the "plurality of the political rainbow" that made up the Sala had decided against Ibarra, proving the former mayor's allegations of an illegitimate campaign against him to be false. The day of his removal, March 7, tight security ringed the hearing room, with police insulating legislators, Ibarra, and his defense team from any who might try to break through the cordon. The vote of two-thirds of the 15 deputies was necessary for Ibarra's removal.

The panel voted 10-4 against Ibarra with one abstention, leading to tearful jubilation among the hundreds of family members gathered on the streets outside. Typical statements from those voting against Ibarra said that the failure to regulate facilities within the city and the fumbled response to the fire fell on Ibarra's head. The city administration failed to conduct inspections and did not apply security measures that might have prevented the fire at the club, which was operating under irregular conditions and with expired licenses. The uncoordinated response to the disaster also drew heavy criticism.

Deputy Hector Bidonde of the Bloque del Sur party, who joined the 10 votes against, said, "It was proven during the trial that the security policy was inadequate and there existed proven situations

of corruption." The judging legislators voted in alphabetical order, each giving brief, televised statements prior to their votes.

Buenos Aires daily Clarin reported that there were five "Macristas" on the panel, three "Kirchneristas", two members of ARI, and the rest were smaller party members.

Beatriz Baltroc of the leftist Autonomia Popular could have been one of the swing voters, and she came under intense pressure to vote against Ibarra, pressure she condemned. "I am sick of authoritarianism and intolerance," she said before casting a vote against the removal of Ibarra. "At the beginning of the trial I had taken a position, and I believed that the prosecution was going to work towards that position. In the development of the trial I found myself filling with doubts." Baltroc said, "I am an opponent of Doctor Ibarra," but she alleged that the trial dealt with political revenge instead of the facts of the case. "Ibarra is responsible for the inefficiency in combating corruption in the year 2004, but in this hall it has not been debated with seriousness. For that reason I vote for absolution." But Baltroc's "no" vote was not enough to save Ibarra.

Deputy Helio Rebot, a Kirchnerista, swung the decision, saying that "the ethics that should be demanded from a government official are much more than can be demanded from an aspirant to government office." He had previously been an undecided member of the body. The last voter, Kirchnerista Deputy Elvio Vitali, abstained from voting, with the necessary 10 to remove already having been tallied.

Families call for criminal prosecution

Ibarra, who had massed between 20,000 and 40,000 people in the streets in a rally in his favor prior to the vote, described the proceeding as a coup orchestrated by conservative political allies who could not succeed against him at the ballot box. He vowed to attempt to overturn the decision in court. Ibarra was able to avoid a decision that would have prevented him from holding political office for four years, as some legislators had sought. "I don't know if others will be able to be more calm with this. Nobody and nothing will return the lives that were lost to us. But we all lost in the search for the truth and justice, because to try to cleanse guilt and find a scapegoat gets us further away from the truth and justice," said Ibarra at a press conference following the decision. "This is not over today nor does it end here," said Ibarra, standing with his defense attorneys. "Our commitment to Buenos Aires continues unchanged."

While families embraced on the streets, they also said they were not finished with their pursuit of Ibarra. They said they were committed to having Ibarra put in jail after a criminal trial. Jorge Telerman takes over Vice mayor Jorge Telerman went from holding Ibarra's place to top official of Buenos Aires in taking over after the vote. Telerman, a member of the Partido Justicialista (PJ), will hold the mayor's office until December 2007. On March 9, he began setting up his new cabinet.

On March 14, he held a meeting with family members of the Cromanon tragedy. He said, "This administration is born over the ruins of Cromanon, over the vices and failures of a government and a society that made it possible. We need to understand the reasons why it was possible....When we are sure that never again will a similar tragedy surprise us, only then will we have transformed

the rubble into our foundation." Nevertheless, Telerman declined to comment directly on the administration of his predecessor.

-- End --