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President Kirchner and Others Prepares 2007 Run

by LADB Staff

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Argentine politicians are building alliances and preparing campaigns for the presidential election to be held in October 2007. President Nestor Kirchner, who enjoys strong popularity numbers and continues to consolidate his executive power, is likely to mount a drive for re-election, although there has been speculation that his wife, Sen. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, could try for the position.

Other opposition figures are attempting to build their own bases for a campaign, among them Rep. Mauricio Macri of the Propuesta Republicana (PRO), ex-President Carlos Menem (1989-1999), and Rep. Elisa Carrio of the Alternativa por una Republica Igualitaria (ARI). Former Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna has become an increasingly vocal critic of the Kirchner administration since the president removed him last year and different political movements have sought to attract him into their parties. Macri emerged as the top opposition figure in the Congress after elections in October 2005 (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04), a vote which brought many of Kirchner's allies greater power in the legislature.

As leader of the PRO, Macri has been working with top figures to build a power base. The president of the popular soccer club Boca Juniors and deputy in the House of Representatives launched his "Vision PRO 2007" in July, although he did not make his candidacy official. "The final decision has to come from an agreement within the PRO over who should be the candidate. I am ready to be that if the [the party] decides that is the best road to defend its ideas," said Macri. He presented the campaign platform alongside ex-Economy Minister Ricardo Lopez Murphy, a political ally. Macri is also toying with the idea of running for mayor of Buenos Aires.

Some analysts maintain that Macri will have scant chance of success at the national level against Kirchner. Kirchner maintains very high approval ratings, due in part to the steady economic recovery the country has undergone since the national financial collapse of 2001. Some surveys put the popularity number as high as 80% and he has gained solid control over his wing of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ). Still, Kirchner faced large protests when cattle producers traveled to the capital in July to strike over export restrictions on meat products. And concerns about violent crime have perennially stirred popular protest.

In the capital city Macri enjoys a strong image, as he demonstrated during the mid-term elections. Macri has criticized the Kirchner style, which many in the press and politics consider too confrontational. "When one reads these proposals [in Vision PRO 2007], one really feels that these ideas are feasible. We hope to debate them in an Argentina that wants to mature and doesn't want to get in confrontations all the time." Macri proposes strengthening "our relations with the countries that want to construct a global community and not with those that are ever more isolated."

Ex-economy chief attacks Kirchner, mulls run for president

Macri had sought to interest Lavagna in joining a coalition, but, so far, Macri's overtures have not succeeded. President Kirchner removed Lavagna from the Economy Ministry after the October elections, replacing him with Felisa Miceli (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06). The ex-minister enjoys some credibility after coming to office in the transitional presidency of Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003) and shepherding the economy back from its worst plunge in decades. He has said he will not decide on a candidacy until sometime in 2007.

Argentina's other traditional opposition force, the Union Civica Radical (UCR), socialists, and dissident PJ figures have discussed forming a coalition around the candidacy of Lavagna, though there is no solid consensus for a Lavagnista bloc yet. Lavagna has rejected invitations from sectors on the right and left, claiming he is "of the progressive center." He argues that, "institutional weakness may demolish the macroeconomy," referring to Kirchner's forceful use of executive power. "The economy of Argentina today is in an exceptional situation," said Lavagna on July 21. "The outlook should be interpreted as a great opportunity...The risk is the classic one of those who receive a great inheritance: wasting it." He criticizes the "lack of clear rules for private investment," saying that, "without rules, investments cease to be made, they stop creating employment."

In an interview with newspaper Clarin, he criticized the state for intervening in the economy. "It buys a little piece of Aerolineas Argentinas, another little piece of Aeropuertos, it gives them to the unions of the water company..." Lavagna said. "I think the state does not have the funds nor the executive capacity to busy itself with everything. It must dedicate itself to education, social problems, security which has deteriorated and institution-building." Lavagna faces criticism from figures like Hugo Moyano, head of the Confederacion General de Trabajo (CGT), the country's biggest union. Moyano has achieved salary increases with the government's support and rejects Lavagna's ideas, saying, "He is the same one who was saying that salary increases create inflation."

Center-left deputy Claudio Lozano rejects Lavagna's claim that he is a centrist. Lavagna, says Lozano, "seeks to put himself in progressive clothing, which is a big lie because he is strongly linked with the most traditional sectors" of the country. Another figure preparing for 2007 is Elisa Carrio of the left-wing ARI, but she is in weak condition after Macri beat her soundly in mid-term elections last October.

Parliament hands Kirchner ability to govern by decree

In July, Kirchner gained congressional approval for a bill that makes it easier for him to govern through executive orders, or decrees, expanding his control over Argentine affairs. The lower house of congress approved the bill on July 21, following Senate approval on July 7. The bill makes executive orders permanent measures unless they're contested by both chambers of congress a change from existing legislation, which requires the government to get approval for a decree within 40 days of its implementation. The week before, Kirchner got the Senate to grant him power to allocate about US\$4.5 billion a year in spending without lawmakers' approval. The lower house is scheduled to vote on the bill in August.

Kirchner, 56, has issued on average more than 60 decrees a year in the three years he's been in office, more than former President Carlos Menem, who issued about 55 decrees a year when he

served in the 1990s, according to the Foundation of the Center of Studies of Politics in Buenos Aires. Lavagna said the decree project, dubbed "superpoderes" or superpowers in the press, "does not work in the sense of improving the quality of institutions." Macri compared Kirchner with authoritarian ex-president of Peru Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), saying the president sought "the destruction of the system of division of powers."

Kirchner supporters like his wife Sen. Fernandez said that rule by presidential decree had been sought ever since a constitutional reform in 1994. Kirchner also argued that the opposition did not want to allow him to govern. The Senate approved the bill 42 to 17 while the House of Representatives approved it 139 to 82.

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