7-20-2007

Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner Announces Presidential Candidacy in Argentina

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner Announces Presidential Candidacy in Argentina

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2007-07-20

Argentine President Nestor Kirchner has decided not to run for re-election in the upcoming October race, but instead his wife Sen. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner will seek the office. The announcement that Fernandez, not Kirchner, would try to keep the couple in the Casa Rosada the presidential palace came shortly after two Kirchner-backed candidates lost badly in regional elections.

Fernandez leads the race as the most favored candidate in polls, and the opposition has failed to unify around a single figure, but a scandal in one of Kirchner's top ministries (see other story in this edition of NotiSur) and the trouncing of his allies in late June elections exposed the couple's vulnerability.

Conservative Macri wins Buenos Aires race

One of Kirchner's top opponents, business magnate and congressmember Mauricio Macri, won the June 24 election for mayor of Buenos Aires, soundly defeating Kirchner-backed candidate Daniel Filmus, who was education minister.

In Tierra del Fuego, the country's southernmost province, incumbent governor and Kirchner ally Hugo Coccaro lost to opposition Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales (ARI) party candidate Fabiana Rios. "Today the vote for change won," Macri, 48, said after Filmus conceded defeat. "We're going to construct an alternative to the official party. There will be no more blaming the past we're here to build the future."

Macri, whose Boca Juniors soccer club won its sixth South American club championship the week before the vote, is a leader of the opposition Propuesta Republicana (PRO). He has said he decided to pursue a career in politics after being kidnapped for 12 days in 1991. The kidnapping was criminal, not political. In 2003 Macri lost his first bid for mayor to Anibal Ibarra, another Kirchner-backed opponent. Two years later he was elected to Congress.

In 2006, Ibarra lost his position as mayor when a tribunal of city legislators voted against him after a nightclub fire killed nearly 200 people (see NotiSur, 2006-03-17). Ibarra opponents claimed that municipal corruption played a role in the blaze and held him culpable for the disaster.

Ibarra had been a key Kirchner ally and a rising national political star before the fire. Filmus, 52, said he took "full responsibility" for his defeat in Argentina's largest city and criticized Macri for refusing to debate him in the final week. He gave his concession speech on a stage with members of Kirchner's Cabinet, including Economy Minister Felisa Miceli and Cabinet Chief Alberto Fernandez.
Macri took 61% of the vote while Filmus took 39%. In Tierra del Fuego, Rios won more than 52% of the vote, while Coccaro got 47%.

Crime emerged as the biggest issue in the Buenos Aires campaign, with stories about robberies and murder often dominating local news in a city where the national government controls the police force. Kirchner, eligible for re-election in October, had not said at that point whether he or his wife, Sen. Fernandez, 54, would run in October's national vote. Elisa Carrio, leader of the opposition ARI party and a possible presidential candidate, said the defeats showed Kirchner's popularity was dwindling. "This is a defeat that Kirchner won't be able to hide," said Sergio Berensztein, director of the Poliarquia polling company in Buenos Aires. "There will be more delays and doubts regarding who will head the official ticket for the presidential election now that Kirchner's image is eroding."

In an interview with Buenos Aires-based newspaper La Nacion, Carrio said her party's victory in Tierra del Fuego shows that "the people are moving beyond the brutal hegemony of the Kirchner government." Kirchner, 57, disparaged Macri after a June 3 first-round election for being a throwback to the "neoliberal" 1990s, when Argentina's sale of state assets and spending controls led the country into a recession that ended with soaring unemployment and a default in late 2001 on US $95 billion worth of bonds.

Alberto Fernandez, Kirchner's Cabinet chief, said the election was not about national politics. "This was a local election," Fernandez said in an interview. "Nestor and Cristina Kirchner are the ones with the most votes for president."

Analysts say the Macri win could position him well for a 2011 presidential run, but Macri focused on crime, traffic, crumbling schools, budget overruns, and garbage collection in appeals to the 2.5 million registered voters. "Tell Kirchner...I'm not a candidate for president," Macri said. "We aren't going to get into a debate about national political models."

Some speculate that Macri saw little chance of beating the Kirchners in a race this October, after having failed to form a united front with top opposition figure Roberto Lavagna (see NotiSur, 2006-07-28), so he focused instead on the mayoral race in the country's largest metropolis.

**Kirchner slips in polls, but still relatively strong**

Kirchner's image had suffered as cold weather and a lack of investment in the energy industry forced rationing in homes and businesses in recent weeks and the second-fastest rate of inflation in South America after Venezuela led to shortages of meat and milk in markets. Kirchner's approval ratings have dropped to 57% from the 80% range in the past few years, according to Adrian Perechodnik, a pollster with Poliarquia.

Poliarquia's survey, based on interviews with 800 people, had a margin of error of 3.5%. The more time went by, the further Kirchner's approval rating fell. In June it dropped to 52% from 57% in May, according to Poliarquia. The president's support numbers were as high as 82% in February 2004. Alicia Kirchner, the president's sister and Minister of Social Development, was attacked by a crowd of protesting teachers in May after having lunch in the family's hometown of Rio Gallegos in Santa
Cruz province. Kirchner was governor of Santa Cruz for 12 years before becoming president in 2003. Tensions around teachers’ strikes have been running high, with one teacher killed by a tear-gas canister police fired at him (see NotiSur, 2007-04-20).

**Fernandez to seek first term**

Kirchner announced July 2 that he would not seek a second term as president of Argentina but would instead support his wife, Sen. Fernandez de Kirchner, as the candidate of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) in October. "Why not finally a woman as the one to deepen change and transformation?"

President Kirchner, with his wife at his side, asked during an afternoon event at the presidential palace. Argentina needs "to renew and generate new ideas," he said, and "all of us profoundly believe in the capacity to excel that Cristina is going to offer."

Fernandez made numerous public shows of support for Chilean President Michelle Bachelet when she ran a popular campaign to become the first elected female president of Chile (see NotiSur, 2006-01-20) and the first South American woman president elected who was not the widow of a former executive.

Observers characterize Kirchner’s decision to step aside in favor of his wife as a maneuver meant to allow the couple to take turns running the country for a dozen years or more. Presidents in Argentina are restricted to two consecutive four-year terms but can run again after a term on the sidelines. The decision is in line with a long Peronist tradition of pushing wives of powerful leaders into positions of power, starting with Evita Peron, the wife of the movement’s founder, Gen. Juan Domingo Peron (1945-1955, 1973-1974), in the 1940s.

In the 1970s, General Peron’s last wife, Maria Estela Peron (1974-1976), known as Isabelita, stood as his running mate. Many Argentine political analysts choose to compare the Kirchners to former US President Bill Clinton and wife Hillary Rodham Clinton. Fernandez is a lawyer with a political base of her own, having served in the lower house of Congress before being elected to the Senate (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04). Recent polls have shown that either of the Kirchners would be the front-runner in the Oct. 28 election.

Kirchner's level of support is about 10 points higher than that of his wife, but surveys show her winning just over the 45% of the vote she would need to avoid a second-round runoff. Her closest rival is Carrio, a congresswoman and former beauty queen who heads the ARI center-left coalition that attacks the corruption and machine politics she says the Kirchners have perpetuated despite promises to modernize the country.

The other contender, running with the Una Nacion Avanzada (UNA) coalition, is Lavagna, the former economy minister who is widely credited with engineering Argentina’s strong comeback after the worst economic crisis in the country’s history in 2001 and 2002. But he was forced to resign late in 2005 (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06). Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez said Sen. Fernandez would formally announce her candidacy on July 19 in her home town, La Plata.