Former Argentine President Menem Loses Badly in Governor's Race

LADB Staff
Former Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999) appears to have come to the end to his political career after a humiliating third-place loss in the gubernatorial race in his home province of La Rioja. The winner, incumbent Gov. Luis Beder Herrera, is an ally of President Nestor Kirchner, meaning that the win in La Rioja could be a favorable sign for the campaign of Kirchner's wife Sen. Cristina Fernandez in her bid to take the presidency in October's election.

The governor's race in the province of Tucuman also went overwhelmingly to the Kirchner-allied incumbent, which may be a sign that Fernandez's chances are strong there in October as well. Positive sign for Cristina Fernandez's presidential bid The 77-year-old Menem was easily defeated by Beder Herrera in the western province of La Rioja on Aug. 19, ending his comeback bid. With 88% of the vote counted late Aug. 19, Gov. Beder Herrera had 41% of the ballots. "We have won by a wide margin," said Beder Herrera to cheering supporters.

Menem, a conservative, free-market supporter who had used two terms as La Rioja governor as a springboard to the presidency and the helm of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) party, placed a distant third with 22%. Menem said, "The voters have spoken and we, as democratic citizens, must heed them." Kirchner and others have blamed Menem's close alliance with the US and adherence to Washington's policies and the dictates of international financing institutions for the 2002 economic crisis (see NotiSur, 2001-11-30, 2001-12-14 and 2002-01-11).

Elected a federal senator of La Rioja in 2005 (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04), Menem had talked about a comeback bid for the presidency but ran for governor instead. Earlier, in 2003, Menem had also talked of a comeback, but a first-round in the presidential election left it apparent that he could not win against Kirchner, who was then a relative-unknown on the national political stage (see NotiSur, 2003-05-23).

Newspapers throughout South America viewed Menem's loss as the likely end of the ex-president's political career. Analysts are tentatively characterizing it as the start of Sen. Fernandez's presidential win. Earlier polls showed Fernandez failing to win the clear majority of the vote necessary to avoid having to hold a runoff. But no other candidate in the race has the support she does, and more recent polls are showing that she may well win in one round, thanks in part to divisions among the opposition.

Elisa Carrio and Ricardo Lopez Murphy of the political groups Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales (ARI) and Recrear, respectively, showed a united front for the first time on Aug. 20, announcing that they were considering an electoral pact in an effort to overcome Fernandez's popularity. But the move may be too little, too late.
The Kirchner-Fernandez team suffered a setback when top opposition figure Mauricio Macri of the Propuesta Republicana (PRO) won the mayor's race in the capital city of Buenos Aires, home to the largest concentration of Argentine voters (see NotiSur, 2007-07-20). But some viewed that race as a rebuke against former mayor Anibal Ibarra, who was impeached for allowing corruption in offices charged with fire-code enforcement after nearly 200 people died in a nightclub fire (see NotiSur, 2006-03-17). Ibarra was a rising star and a Kirchner ally, but Macri's decision to run for mayor of Buenos Aires rather than the presidency indicated that he viewed the race against Fernandez or Kirchner unwinnable this year.

Buenos Aires newspaper writer Mariano Perez de Eulate characterized Beder Herrera's win not necessarily as a triumph for Kirchner but as a triumph for his most ardent circle of supporters, "the penguins" as they are known colloquially. Perez de Eulate wrote that supporters of Cabinet chief Alberto Fernandez did not back Beder Herrera, while the "pinguinos" cast their lot with him, thereby strengthening their positions within the Kirchner government.

The second-place winner in the race with 25% of the vote three percentage points more than Menem was Ricardo Quintela, another Kirchnerista who, according to Perez de Eulate, was backed by Alberto Fernandez's "political godfather," ex-governor Angel Maza.

Regarding Menem's loss, Perez de Eulate wrote that Menem told him, "He who has been pope cannot return to being bishop." Perez de Eulate wrote, "Judging by yesterday's result, and following along with his literary metaphor, the man returned to the seminary."

Tucuman governor's race also goes to Kirchner ally

In the neighboring province of Tucuman, in Argentina's northwest, incumbent Gov. Jose Alperovich won another four-year term, promising that the people of Tucuman "will support Cristina Fernandez on Oct. 28." That has potential to be a significant promise, since he took 78% of the vote.

Fuerza Republicana candidate and Sen. Ricardo Bussi took 5.25% of the vote. Bussi is the son of retired Gen. Antonio Bussi who was detained for crimes during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 (see NotiSur, 2003-08-08). Esteban Jerez of the Coalicion Civica por la Resistencia also ran and won 3.72% of the vote.

Alperovich was originally elected as a member of the Union Civica Radical (UCR), but he later joined the PJ and supported Kirchner once he came to power in 2003. It was the first election he ran in after reforms allowed sitting officials to run for re-election, and he ran in this election with the Frente para la Victoria.

On Sept. 2, the provinces of Santa Fe, Cordoba, and Salta will go to the polls to elect regional leaders. Fernandez introduces VP candidate On Aug. 15, Fernandez introduced her running mate, Mendoza Gov. Julio Cobos. It was Fernandez's first official act of campaigning. She stressed Cobos' membership in the UCR as showing that there was "pluralistic concertation" in her campaign, joining Peronists, UCR members, and other smaller political movements.
-- End --