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Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner Wins Argentine Presidency in First Round

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Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner became the first democratically elected female president of Argentina after she won the election on Oct. 28 by a broad margin. Winning almost 45% of the vote with none of her competitors coming within 20 percentage points of her, she well exceeded legal requirements that would have triggered a runoff. Her allies in the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) also won victories on Oct. 28, increasing the party's majority in both houses of Congress.

Fernandez, 54 years old and a senator, will be inaugurated into office to replace her husband, President Nestor Kirchner, on Dec. 10. Her vice-presidential running mate was Julio Cobos (see NotiSur, 2007-08-31).

Opposition trounced and divided

As of Oct. 30, the Direccion Nacional Electoral (DNE), the Interior Ministry's electoral authority, reported that Fernandez, running under the banner of the Frente para la Victoria, led her nearest opponent by more than 4 million votes. With 96.58% of polling stations counted, the DNE reported 8,204,624 votes for Fernandez, 44.92% of the valid ballots cast. She carried 21 of 24 provinces, losing only Tierra del Fuego, San Luis, and the capital district of Buenos Aires.

Reports said that the middle and upper classes tended to vote against her, while the poor voted for her. Elisa Carrio of the Afirmacion por una Republica Igualitaria (ARI), formerly called Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales, came in second with 4,191,361 votes, 22.95% of the valid votes. She ran under the banner of the Confederacion Coalicion Civica. Her second-place position in the election along with ARI gains in the Senate gave her some prominence as a key opposition figure.

Former economy minister Roberto Lavagna, running with the coalition Alianza Concertacion Una Nacion Avanzada (UNA), won 3,083,577 votes, or 16.88%. In his campaign, he criticized Kirchner and Fernandez for seeking to hide the true extent of inflation (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02), and he took credit as the true force behind the economic recovery underway since the 2001-2002 economic meltdown.

Alberto Rodriguez Saa, brother of former President Adolfo Rodriguez Saa (Dec. 23-29, 2001) and a member of the right wing of the PJ, received 1,408,736 votes, 7.71% of valid ballots cast. Fernando "Pino" Solanas of the Partido Socialista Autentico took 292,933 votes (1.60%). Jorge Omar Sobisch, governor of Neuquen who was the focal point of protests during which police killed a striking teacher (see NotiSur, 2007-04-20), won 284,161 votes (1.56%). Ricardo Lopez Murphy running with the group Recrear came in seventh with 1.45% of the vote, or 264,746 votes. All the remaining seven candidates listed by the DNE received less than a single percentage point of the votes.
Election authorities said 19,452,594 Argentines voted out of 27,090,236 potential registered voters, meaning 71.81% participation. The vote is compulsory and the press regarded the abstention rate as high. Fernandez's win was more or less a fait accompli, given her high standing in polls prior to the vote and the opposition's inability to unify around a single viable candidate. There were 934,739 blank ballots (4.81%) and 217,744 votes (1.12%) were nullified; 35,061 votes (0.81%) were "reviewed or impugned." That left 18,265,050 valid votes, 93.90% of the total votes cast.

The election, in addition to selecting the president and vice president, also named 24 senators, 124 lower house deputies, nine governors, and local lawmakers in Argentina's capital and 10 of 24 provinces. To win the presidential race, the top candidate needed to have received 45% of vote, or 40% with 10% lead over the closest follower. If Fernandez's lead had not been as broad, the election would have moved to a Nov. 25 runoff.

The election represents the further consolidation of Kirchnerist power in both the national government and the Peronist party. Kirchner was first able to strengthen his standing with a midterm election in 2005 that advanced his wing of the PJ in the Congress (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04). Fernandez's triumph will likely make their control of the PJ last into the foreseeable future.

The beginning of the Kirchner dynasty?


The second-most-important candidate in the race was also a woman. Carrio's ARI gained two seats in the Senate, making it the largest opposition party. Carrio's second-place finish gave her status at least in the eyes of Argentine newspaper writers as one of the most important opposition figures. Buenos Aires daily Clarin said the race was on to determine who would be top leader of the opposition during the coming Fernandez administration Carrio or Buenos Aires mayor and businessman Mauricio Macri of the Propuesta Republicana (PRO).

Macri's star seemed to be on the wane as he did not even make a public appearance at the post-election gathering of his allied candidates, whose election results were disappointing. While Carrio's coalition was on the rise after the Oct. 28 vote, the fight for primacy in a weak opposition does seems to be a fairly small consolation prize.

During the campaign, international press reports consistently compared Fernandez to Eva "Evita" Peron, Juan Domingo's first wife of global fame, and to Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party front-runner in opinion surveys in the race for the US presidency in 2008. Neither characterization was very appropriate, which did not stop the international press from repeating it ad nauseam. With a political career as a three-term senator, Fernandez hit the national stage long before her husband, when he was still an obscure governor in the southern province of Santa Cruz. "Hillary was able to position herself nationally because her husband was president. She didn't have a political life
beforehand and that isn't my case," Fernandez said in an interview with CNN en Espanol, referring to her 30-year career in Argentine law and politics.

And the Evita comparison made even less sense, with Fernandez having an extremely different biography from the actress-turned-populist and charity matron who died at 33. Fernandez's "glamorous" look and fashion sense appeared to give international reporters reason to make the comparison to Evita. Fernandez, a lawyer and mother of two, began her political career in 1985 in the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz, holding several positions in the local legislature. Since 1995, she has served as a congressmember and senator for the provinces of Santa Cruz and Buenos Aires.

While campaigning, Fernandez refused to debate her opponents or give press interviews, and she spent a good deal of time abroad, meeting with foreign leaders. Some analysts saw this "aloofness" as an effort to cultivate the image of already being president and critics attacked her for it. Claims of corruption within the Kirchner Cabinet alienated some voters after a security sweep discovered a suitcase full of cash in the office bathroom of economy minister Felisa Miceli. Miceli had to resign over the incident (see NotiSur, 2007-07-20).

Press reports have puzzled about why Kirchner chose to step aside and allow Fernandez to run, noting that although they are both popular figures Kirchner had about ten percentage points more popularity and would have won more handily than Fernandez, if opinion surveys were accurate. One popular theory is that the two intend to attempt to hold office until 2019, with Kirchner running in 2011 and Fernandez running the next term, alternating their way around the two-term limit set on presidents.

In the coming period, Fernandez's partners in the Congress from the Frente para la Victoria and other allied groups will hold 44 of 72 Senate seats and 153 of 257 deputy seats in the lower house of Congress. They gained three seat in the Senate and 13 seats in the house of deputies. Fernandez told jubilant supporters in Buenos Aires she would continue the policies of her husband, who oversaw 9% economic growth and a tumbling unemployment rate since taking power in 2003. "Since 2003 we've fought poverty, unemployment, and the things that did so much damage and brought so much tragedy to the Argentine people," Fernandez said with her husband by her side. "We're going to construct a different history."

**Growth, inflation, energy shortages main challenges**

Fernandez gave few details during the campaign about how she would manage the country's economy, never holding a news conference or issuing a platform. Economists and pollsters such as Buenos Aires-based Felipe Noguera say inflation, energy shortages, and government-backed price controls threaten to undermine her promises to "deepen" Kirchner's economic achievements.

"Cristina's implicit mandate is to keep the good times rolling," said Noguera, who owns Felipe Noguera Consultores. "But in light of energy shortages, inflation, and low investment in the economy, the big question is whether she'll be able to deliver on that mandate."

Fernandez repeatedly emphasized the contrast between conditions today and those after Argentina's financial crisis in 2001 and 2002, when the country defaulted on US$95 billion in bonds
and the peso lost 70% of its value against the dollar. She told supporters Oct. 25 that, when her husband was elected in 2003, more people were unemployed than had voted for him.

Under Kirchner, Argentina's poverty rate fell to 23.4% this year from a high of 54% in the first half of 2003. Unemployment dropped to a 15-year low of 8.5% in the second quarter, down from 21.5% in 2002. The past two years Fernandez has led efforts to get Senate backing for her husband's legislative priorities. This included laws granting the president power to alter government spending without congressional approval (see NotiSur, 2006-01-13), a change former President Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989) said meant the "death of the Republic."

One of Fernandez's main challenges will be how to deal with wage demands from labor unions, said Ernesto Kritz, an economist at the Center for Labor Studies in Buenos Aires. Labor leaders are expected to seek wage increases of at least 20% next year, raising pressure on inflation that economists and opposition leaders say is double the officially reported rate of 8.6%.

"The unions will be a challenge for the next government," said Kritz. "Fernandez will want to moderate their demands, but it won't be easy to bargain with them." Workers under collective contracts, representing 60% of all registered employees, received a 22% wage increase this year on top of a 21% raise in 2006.

Traditional leftist movements have been divided in how to approach dealing with the center-left governments of Argentina and Brazil, with some movement figures joining the government and others opposing their "inadequate" policies to reform economic and social conditions (see NotiSur, 2006-05-19). As president, Fernandez will also have to decide what to do about electricity rates, which were frozen in 2002, leading to a lack of investment in energy exploration and production. Power shortages during the Southern Hemisphere winter this year forced factories to cut output.

Holders of about US$20 billion in defaulted Argentine debt will look to the new government to reopen negotiations after they rejected a 2005 agreement that paid 30 cents on the dollar (see NotiSur, 2005-03-11). Failure to reach an accord would keep the country from being able to directly tap international credit markets. Economic growth will slow to 7.5% this year and 5.5% in 2008, according to an Oct. 22 report by Ricardo Amorim, chief Latin American economist at WestLB AG in New York.

A central bank survey of 56 economists forecast growth of 6.3% next year. Some analysts took Fernandez's broad victory as a vindication of Kirchner's defiance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the body many Argentines blamed for the economic crisis of late 2001. Jocelyn Olcott, a professor of Latin American history at Duke University, called the vote "the soundest rejection of the neoliberal project....It's an endorsement of continuing with Kirchner's program, which was an emphasis on social programs over...the IMF project."

Olcott compared the Kirchner administration with that of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, saying, "Kirchner, like Chavez, has put a lot of emphasis on social issues, right, and so rather than leaving everything to market forces, [showing] an understanding that you have to have the government involved in creating social infrastructure in order to promote development." Olcott
said that Fernandez has been "savvy," by not taking sides in the push and pull between the US and Venezuela and by meeting with US first lady Laura Bush.

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