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Routine Legislative Elections Take on More Importance in Argentina

by LADB Staff

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On June 28, nearly 28 million Argentines will go to the polls to elect half (128) the members of the Chamber of Deputies, one-third (24) of the Senate, and hundreds of other lower-ranking officials. Amid a turbulent campaign, charged with rumors and insults, with the government and the opposition divided into multiple large and small fronts and parties, a simple legislative election has become an authentic plebiscite in which, at times, both sides have affirmed that the institutional stability of the country is at stake in these elections.

The large corporations and communications media have played a central role in this campaign as never before, siding with and economically supporting the center and rightist opposition, and managing to get 300 leaders to become aspirants to a seat in the national Congress or in the provincial or municipal legislatures (see NotiSur, 2009-02-20, 2009-03-27).

Nevertheless, with the exception of small leftist groups, no one has put forth any proposals, no one has presented a platform with the major issues that they plan to tackle, no one has been introduced at a rally or on the TV screen to say what they intend to do during the four years they will occupy the office they are running for. "In three months of campaigning, the candidates have not come up with a single idea, which does not bode well for the future," wrote political scientist Atilio Boron in the daily Pagina 12.

Lots of attacks, no programs

The governing party attacks the opposition for the past policies of its leaders and candidates because effectively it has presented no proposals to the electorate. Opposition candidates counterattack with accusations against the government of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. Its proposals are reduced to asking for votes to "humiliate" the president, as Eduardo Buzzi has often said.

Buzzi is one of the leaders of the lockout by large agriculture-producer associations last year (see NotiSur, 2008-06-20, 2008-08-01). Together with the opposition and the media, they pushed the government until it imposed taxes on soy exports with which it promised to build schools, hospitals, roads, and houses. The government, which has at its disposal a network of local caudillos who guarantee it victory in the smaller provinces, is betting everything on the success the president's husband, former President Nestor Kirchner (2000-2004), can garner as first candidate for deputy of Buenos Aires province.

With 38% of eligible voters, Buenos Aires is the largest electoral district in the country, and an important lead over the opposition there would be enough to give it a national majority that, in part, would blur the success its opponents will obtain in some of the other large districts. The opposition is putting all its chips on the votes it can pull together in the city of Buenos Aires and the provinces of Mendoza, Cordoba, and Santa Fe.

In the latter, however, it will not be the right but the progressive Partido Socialista (PS) that will take the victory, as already happened in the 2007 general elections when a PS candidate won the governorship for the first time in history. In any event, beyond the governing party's successes, everything points to a change in the makeup of the two houses of Congress after the election, and the government will no longer have the overwhelming majority it has relied on in the first two years of the president's term.

The opposition has all its hopes pinned on two groups: the center-right Coalicion Civica (CC) and the rightist Propuesta Republicana (PRO), which has had a majority in the city of Buenos Aires (second-largest electoral district in the country) since 2007 and can pick up a significant number of votes in Buenos Aires province.

The two sectors have the support of business and financial corporations and the major print, radio, and TV media outlets. Prominent on their candidate lists are representatives of agricultural industry and activities, who entered the political fray with the stated objective of forming their own legislative blocs, beyond the CC and PRO, through which to bring to Congress an agenda favoring their sectoral interests.

If the predictions of some business polls are confirmed, it would be the first opportunity in the institutional life of the country for associations of industrialists and agricultural producers, as such, to participate directly in drafting major economic policies. For these groups, it is important to reverse government policies in two specific areas: the renationalization of businesses that had been privatized in the 1990s, and, above all, the policy of taxing agricultural exports, which they term confiscatory.

Governing-party hopes pinned on former president

The government saw the risks that it was running. That is the only explanation for why the former president is running in a district that is not his and for a relatively minor office compared with his former positions three times governor of Santa Cruz in the south of the country and president from 2003 to 2007. At times extremely vehement, Kirchner was the first to describe these elections as a plebiscite. "In this election the choice is between us and chaos," he said in mid-March.

To support that characterization, the governing party can point, as an extenuating circumstance, to the CC already talking about "Chavezization" of the country (because of the excellent relations that both Kirchner and the president have had and continue to have with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez). And it can also point to analyst Rosendo Fraga, one of the ideologues of the right, who said, "The direction Argentine economic policy is taking seems more like Russian authoritarian capitalism than Venezuelan '21st century socialism.'"

Fraga posted this in April on the Web page of his Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría (CENM), and he repeated it June 17 in statements to Reuters. With this perception, the right is conducting what some analysts and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) call the costliest electoral campaign in the history of the country. In it, as Boron says, there is no presentation of programs. The ideas underlie words such as those of the CC and Fraga, and the right has not wavered from launching

a rumor campaign in which it is playing with issues that are very sensitive for the stability of any country and for the health of any democracy.

Amid the global crisis, and when the country was still showing good signs of economic activity, the CC's first candidate for deputy, Alfonso Prat Gay a former JP Morgan analyst and former Banco Central president said that, "after it loses the elections," the government will impose a strong devaluation of the peso.

The Union Industrial Argentina (UIA), a business organization whose members are the major national businesses and multinational groups, took up Pray Gay's statement, and its version got front-page coverage in dailies Clarin and La Nacion, the country's two leading papers. The first PRO candidate for Buenos Aires province, Francisco de Narvaez a Colombia-born businessman who recently entered politics and is under judicial investigation for alleged ties to drug trafficking sought to win the vote of small savers by saying that he was "certain" that, if the governing party won, it would nationalize businesses and attack private property. "We will go through some very dangerous months," he said. "The government will move on the banks and will end up with savers' deposits. It has the Hugo Chavez model in mind."

Among other rumors, Clarin's cover story on June 14 said that, "after the June 28 defeat," the government would move the presidential elections scheduled for October 2011 ahead to March 2010. In the 560-word article, it put a similar opinion in the mouth of "one of the government officials who spends a lot of time with Nestor Kirchner." Two days earlier, it had quoted unidentified sources with the US State Department to spread another unsettling rumor for the business class that the White House was "very uneasy with the economic lines the Argentine government is following." The US Embassy denied the story.

On May 16, the head of the Buenos Aires government, powerful businessman Mauricio Macri, one of the major beneficiaries of the 1990s privatization policies, said the government was considering reprivatizing Aerolineas Argentinas, which was renationalized last year. De Narvaez, his PRO ally, added without proof that the decision was a mistake that cost investors "billions of dollars" and that he is in favor of continuing the policy of privatizations, which is, coincidentally or not, one of the UIA's demands. It will soon be clear whether Argentina will be in for difficult times following a "routine" legislative election.

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