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## Little Gained From National Dialogue in Argentina

by LADB Staff

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During an exchange on Aug. 6, the leader of the governing party in the Senate taunted his counterparts in the opposition with the sarcastic question, "Are you going to let us govern or not?" Sen. Ernesto Sanz, Senate leader of the Union Civica Radical (UCR), the main opposition party, silenced everyone with a response as short as it was categorical: "I know what you're talking about. There are sectors that don't want this government to last until 2011 [the date the present administration's mandate ends], but they aren't part of this parliamentary environment."

No one asked Sen. Sanz whom he was naming without actually naming them, but no one doubted that he was referring to leaders of agricultural and media enterprises, allied since March 2008 in a systematic and virulent offensive against the constitutional government. It is an alliance that a group of intellectuals who defend institutional rule have denounced, accusing it of "trying to foment a dismissive climate," and that others, such as union leader Hugo Yasky, less subtly call "those working for a coup."

That same day, coincidentally, the two morning dailies with the largest national circulation La Nacion and Clarin ran huge headlines referring to the tragic situation of poverty. There was nothing new in the coverage, no new statistics, no dramatic new event. To explain their sudden concern for society's weakest, they cited a letter from Pope Benedict XVI exhorting the government to "end the scandal of poverty."

On Aug. 7, the feast of San Cayetano, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio expanded on the newspaper coverage by taking up the same theme. However, neither the papers nor the cardinal made it clear that the papal letter was from May 9 and was a call for Catholics to donate generously to a collection earmarked for helping the poor, not a missive to the government of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. Nor did either the newspapers or the cardinal explain their confusion in treating a three-month-old letter as current.

At the same time, the Catholic Church had become a political actor and had headed up the opposition campaign. Archbishop Hector Aguer, president of the Comision Episcopal de Educacion Catolica and, according to daily Pagina 12, a leader of the most conservative wing of the church, accused the government of promoting sex education by using a teacher-training manual "another totalitarian imposition," he said that merited three adjectives never before used by the Catholic hierarchy. The manual gave a "reductionist," "constructionist," and "neomarxist" view of sexuality, he said.

On Aug. 10, Eduardo de la Serna, a Catholic priest and national coordinator of the Movimiento de Sacerdotes en Opcion por los Pobres, wrote in Pagina 12 that there was nothing "fortuitous" about "some episcopal voices," many of whom were "never concerned about the poor," and he ventured to say that the Catholic Church "is again playing the coup card." Government initiates

national dialogue Until then, Argentine daily life was unfolding against the backdrop of a tedious political and social dialogue, which the government had opened up to unleash what the opposition had anticipated would be a "flood of ideas." On one side, the government assembled the 50 parties with parliamentary representation to work together to revise the rules of the game to make political action more transparent.

The government would receive them in small groups and it prepared "with all the comprehension in the world," that is, it was willing to listen to any proposal the opposition wished to contribute to the national debate. In addition, the government invited all groups active in the life in the country to join a Consejo Economico y Social professional associations, unions and other social organizations, consumers and users of services, agricultural businesses, industries of various sectors (construction, energy, automotive, iron and steel, petroleum, etc.) and even bankers all groups except churches and the retired military's social organizations.

For the political encounter, the largest political parties demanded to be received individually. For the economic and social round, the agriculture corporation represented by Mesa de Enlace also demanded exclusivity. Both demands were met. In the political dialogue, the government has obtained three unexpected successes, especially considering that the invitation to the opposition was an inevitable necessity resulting from the significant setback suffered in the June 28 legislative elections (see NotiSur, 2009-07-10). The successes are: 1) The deluge of ideas was not a deluge.

The opposition exposed all its impotence with just a few rehashed proposals, such as opening space to deliberate on measures to reduce poverty, drawing up a joint agrarian policy, providing for the federal government to send more resources to the provinces, and in what was a surprise for the government calling for guarantees, using the until-then questioned subsidies, that utility rates (gas, electricity, transportation, telephone) would not be increased. 2) It has become clear that the opposition's legislative agenda is set by agribusiness, which irritates other businesses and displeases the general public, as well. 3, and perhaps the most important) Just setting up the dialogue divided the opposition and left at odds the two most prominent possible presidential candidates for the 2011 elections (Deputy-elect Elisa Carrio and Vice President Julio Cobos), who participated in the June elections within the same political alliance.

Carrio refused to take part, saying that the appropriate venue for such a dialogue was the Congress and not the Interior Ministry, while Cobos was an enthusiastic participant because, he said, "We cannot be so illogical as to demand a dialogue and then refuse when they give it to us." To the government's delight, the rupture seems to be the inevitable end of the opposition front.

### *Agribusiness sees itself as leading the country*

The Consejo Economico y Social turned out to be a dialogue of the deaf. Everyone asked for something and everyone agreed to something. The only ones continuing to receive government subsidies milk producers, dairy-product plants, and feedlot operators were agricultural producers, but also, as usual, they were the only ones in disagreement. They demanded more, threatening to return to a lockout like that of last year (see NotiSur, 2008-10-24), which led to food shortages and higher food prices, and, to enforce their threats, they count on the support of the most important media outlets.

What's more, agribusiness was left as the only sector able to capitalize on the needs of the political opposition, which, far from having a unified proposal, offers the pathetic image of a divided leadership because of personal ambitions or because of a simple affinity to be the center of attention.

"We alone are in a position to conduct the actual transition process until 2011, showing the way to that lukewarm opposition that says it supports us," said Eduardo Buzzi, a leader of Mesa de Enlace. "That is dramatic. The government didn't realize that it lost the July 28 elections, but the opposition didn't notice that it won them. If Mesa de Enlace doesn't take charge of this process and indicate to the political opposition what it needs to do, the opposition will disintegrate," said Carlos Garetto, head of the Confederacion Intercooperativa Agropecuaria (CONINAGRO), one of the four largest agricultural-producers associations.

The large agriculture producers see themselves as masters of the future, their own and that of all Argentines. To take advantage of the political acts of the bishops and cardinals, they say they are concerned about poverty, although in this matter they unfortunately have no ideas to bring to the debate. But they insist that they are concerned. Since they see that the opposition needs them, they are preparing for the future, and "for now," they say, "we will be patient with the government."

Before the elections, producers set up political-formation schools and were able to bring to Congress a group of 22 senators and deputies who will form the first corporative bloc in the legislative history of the country. For the future, they agreed to create a trust to finance study groups that will be in charge of writing bills that their legislators and their allies will present to Congress. With the contribution of .002% of each producer's profits they plan to have between US\$800,000 and US\$1 million annually.

"They're dreaming if they think that Mesa de Enlace has to lead the transition; they're crazy, this is how to charge a tax to make policy," said opposition Deputy Eduardo Macaluse. "If businesses want to manage policy, we're toast," said Pedro Moroni, a UCR leader in the lower house. Not everyone shares that opinion. In early September the bishops will meet with Mesa de Enlace to analyze how the church and agricultural producers can join forces to see that Argentina remains relatively uncontaminated amid the global crisis.

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