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LADB Staff

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Argentine President Cristina Fernandez Enjoys Political Rebound

by LADB Staff

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No one in Argentina neither those in the government and political parties nor political analysts and commentators in the press imagined that, only two months after an electoral defeat considered nearly a knockout, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner would be back on her feet and even sitting on an imaginary balcony watching the parade of what is left of the opposition. After all, following the June 28 election, the opposition had seemed, and imagined itself, called to lead the country into the future (see NotiSur, 2009-07-10).

In the wake of the resounding electoral blow, governing-party strategists recommended an intelligent reading of reality and, consequently, an invitation to opposition parties to participate in a debate on major issues that might become central themes of the future national political agenda. The call to dialogue was not a sign of government weakness but rather a gesture of profound realism.

However, some opposition leaders, short on imagination and less sophisticated, understood it as a sign that the president was almost resigning and leaving the executive in the hands of those leaders whose electoral performance was good, thanks to actions by two powerful groups the soy barons and the media monopolies that had joined forces to install in the electoral showcase those willing to defend their sectoral interests.

Shortly after the legislative elections and a dispassionate reading of the numbers, the government said that, with two and one-half years of its constitutional term remaining, it must ensure governability by offering to dialogue with everyone. With party leaders, to see how they could together promote a political reform to ensure transparency by carrying out simultaneous, obligatory, and open primary elections, and, especially, radically change the rules governing financing political campaigns.

And, with business leaders and workers, to design a forum for discussion that will serve to buffer social conflicts. "I don't think that it's the strategy of a weakened government or the birth a new willingness to dialogue. In any normal country, a government that loses an election and still has 30 months left in its term reacts by recognizing that society indicated a certain desire to change course and have better dialogue with the opposition," Fernando Straface, director of the Centro de Implementacion de Politicas Publicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC), told BBC Mundo.

Without expressly intending to, the government, by merely issuing the invitation to dialogue, ensured that both opposition flanks began to rapidly disintegrate. Among opposition politicians, because, despite their partisan majority at the start of conversations, albeit with different interests, some groups refused to participate, hoping to corner the government and take advantage of its

weakness. And among business leaders, basically large soy growers, because they misjudged their real power, and, when they opted for confrontation, found that small producers were unwilling to go along with them in a fight in which their interests were not considered among the demands that Mesa de Enlace (the organization that encompasses the four most powerful agricultural entities) presented to the government. This was made clear when the Mesa surprisingly called its eighth lockout on Aug. 28.

The June 28 elections, a key moment to measure the beginning stages of government weakness, opened the possibility for three parties or fronts to compete for leadership of the opposition. Although the October 2011 presidential elections are still a long way off, each of the five leaders who stood out in the campaign and came out better electorally thought they were destined to succeed Cristina Fernandez. They are conservatives Mauricio Macri, head of Buenos Aires city government, and Felipe Sola, deputy and former governor of Buenos Aires province; Carlos Reutemann, former governor of Santa Fe province and dissident governing-party senator; Elisa Carrio, deputy-elect and leader of a party that in its eight years of existence has had various names and is now called Coalicion Civica (CC); and Vice President Julio Cobos, who remains in office despite having broken with the president last year and having joined the soy growers' protest that almost brought down the government.

Some divisions

Macri and Sola belong to the same political group but are nevertheless at odds. The same is true of Carrio and Cobos, who sleep under the same political tent the Acuerdo Civico y Social (ACyS) but have both said publically that they would not vote for the other. "Not even in a runoff," said Carrio. While the government happily looks on, ambitions are such within the opposition that the debate seems more like a fight and has led to an outright war, with everyone against everyone else.

When the government called for dialogue, the various groups within the ACyS, including the century-old Union Civica Radical (UCR), showed their willingness to participate except Carrio, who considered participation "supporting the government's dirty game." They did ask that the debate on political reform include other issues, such as a series of changes in the government statistics agency and a redefinition of the Consejo de la Magistratura (a state body that chooses candidates for judgeships and then supervises their performance).

To participate in the second round of dialogue, they now demand that two other points be added: an integral solution to the problems of agricultural producers, punished by a prolonged drought (a good mine of voters), and a new way of apportioning resources that the central government transfers to provincial governments.

Despite this hardening of positions, Carrio maintains that her partners in the legislative elections have renounced the principles that gave rise to the ACyS. The alliance, which came in second in the June elections, eight points behind the governing party, rapidly split into at least two groups, one led by Cobos and the other by Carrio. But the other three ACyS parties, the UCR, the Partido Socialista (PS), and Generacion para un Encuentro Nacional (GEN), an UCR offshoot, seem headed toward creating a third faction.

Reutemann, who belongs to the same Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) as the president, but who, in June, voted against the government and is seen as a potential 2011 presidential candidate, also broke with the coalition that brought him a triumphant win in Santa Fe, numerically the third-largest electoral district in the country.

Roxanna Latorre, a senator like Reutemann and his principal ally and partner since both entered politics, was expelled by Reutemann from the dissident PJ bloc in the Senate, accused of "betraying the principles that gave rise to our alliance." Latorre was open to such a charge because her presence allowed a quorum to be reached in a session in which the government comfortably won an extension of special powers authorizing the president to redirect budgetary line items when a need or emergency makes it advisable. Latorre voted against it.

For Propuesta Republicana (PRO), the party of Macri and Sola and winner in June in both Buenos Aires city and province, the two largest electoral districts, things are not going better. Macri the real "owner" of the votes has already announced he will run for president in 2011, but Sola also feels entitled to do so, meaning that in the lower house PRO legislators act in consensus but in two different blocs.

"The leaders don't seem to have understood how to interpret the June results. They should know that all midterm elections since 1983, when the country emerged from the long dictatorship (1976-1983), have been a headache for the incumbent president. Government parties always lose legislative elections, at least in Argentina. Therefore, to dream of transferring today's results to the 2011 presidential election is, at the least, naive and to fight over that candidacy a serious mistake with the electorate, which expects more from the opposition," said a spokesperson for the Centro de Estudios Union para una Nueva Mayoria.

Amid the opposition crisis, the government sent Congress a bill for a Ley de Servicios de Comunicacion Audiovisual, which aims to end the broadcasting law in effect since the dictatorship. Written by consensus by some 300 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which for five years held hundreds of public hearings in all provinces, and supported by the two labor federations, the associations of journalists and actors, public universities throughout the country, and hundreds of social organizations, the bill affects the interests of the large media groups, limits multimedia companies, and sets aside one-third of FM radio and cable TV stations for the use of various churches, unions, community organizations, and other nonprofit NGOs.

The debate on the bill has just begun, but voices in all political parties that are not part of the governing coalition have suggested that, if the government makes some changes, they are willing to vote in favor of the bill, which will undeniably put them at odds with the leaders of the three opposition groups.

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