Argentina: Opposition Poised To Leverage Its Majority In Congress

LADB Staff
Argentina: Opposition Poised To Leverage Its Majority In Congress

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2010-01-08

The June legislative elections in which Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's governing coalition lost its majority in both houses of Congress ushered in a critical period for the country (NotiSur, July 10, 2009).

A fragmented opposition that is, nevertheless, able to unite when confronting the government on large and even small issues is dangerously contesting power spaces, often coming close to breaking democratic institutionality. Although the new legislators (128 of 257 deputies and 24 of 72 senators) were elected on June 28, they were only sworn in on Dec. 10 as stipulated in the Constitution.

Taking advantage of the circumstantial majority, on Dec. 10 the opposition, which automatically questions anything coming from the administration and unites the right with small progressive sectors, attempted to put its people in all legislative positions in the line of presidential succession.

This would have meant that in any eventual death, incapacity, or removal from office in which the president was unable to govern, the next president would have been a leader of the right not elected by the citizens.

This power play is taking place within a context in which Vice President Julio Cabos has publically broken with the president, leads the opposition, and subtly offers himself as her successor.

The president's opponents were so audacious as to interfere with the communications system of the presidential helicopter and issue death threats against her.

Large agricultural producers wield political power

As has been happening since March 2008, when soy producers confronted the government with a lockout and blockaded roads and bridges, which led to food shortages for the population, the large power groups political parties, corporations, and the media have again aligned in this new stage of "a struggle that will end only when we have gotten rid of this predatory government," as large landowner Hugo Biolcati, president of the powerful Sociedad Rural Argentina (SRA), said.

In 2008, with international prices for cereals and oilseeds extraordinarily high, soy growers implemented a destabilizing plan against a package of economic measures that the government said would reduce their earnings and lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth (NotiSur, April 11, 2008, and June 20, 2008).

This time, they announced that they would change tactics and, instead of blocking food distribution, go directly to occupying production plants, wheat and rice mills, grain warehouses, and port installations. They will thus not only strangle the consumer, they will also stop agricultural exports, the country's main source of income. In the June elections, opposition parties were able to get deputies and senators elected who were known leaders of corporate agriculture (NotiSur, June 26, 2009).
The parties had set up training schools for potential candidates and generously financed the campaigns of parties that ran those candidates on their slates. However, they have now pledged to promote political measures that do not include the basic points of the activist corporate platform, such as exempting the agriculture tax.

"Perhaps what they are looking for, really, is to destabilize," said analyst Luis Bruchstein in the daily newspaper Pagina 12. The agricultural producers put their sectoral demands on the back burner and are now prioritizing policies aimed at slowly weakening the government until it falls.

At a Dec. 20 event in a Buenos Aires park, the Mesa de Enlace, the meeting and action umbrella group for the four main agricultural associations, read a manifesto outlining the positions that "the new legislators will be obliged to support and impose from the Congress." They are: "to defend the republic, institutions, political federalism, and security" four points that, except the last, most political analysts say are not priorities for society.

Rabbi Sergio Bergman, a key figure among a group of religious leaders of various denominations and creeds and intellectuals of various disciplines hired by the Mesa de Enlace to provide a democratic foundation for its ideas, was somewhat more expansive when he repeated the platform. "We must adopt a new state model to defend the republic," he said. He spoke of "reforming the Consejo de la Magistratura," the agency that provides ethical oversight for the judiciary.

And, he said, "It is necessary to repeal the laws that give the president decision-making freedom." The ideas have not been fleshed out, but rightist politicians at the meeting nevertheless agreed that they must be promoted in Congress.

SRA leader Biolcati's task was to publically commit the principal leaders of the opposition parties, to whom he directed some surprising words. "You," he said, looking at each one, "are obliged to follow us in this crusade. We have prevented them from stealing the ballot boxes, now you must keep them from stealing the results of the June 28 election."

No one understood what he was referring to when he spoke of stealing ballot boxes. Everything indicates that these sectors are willing to go further.

On Dec. 11, the communications system of the helicopter carrying President Fernandez from the presidential palace to the Casa de Gobierno was interrupted for almost three minutes. As "Avenida de las Camelias," the military march used to accompany the reading of all proclamations of the 1976-1983 dictatorship, played in the background, a clearly audible voice said imperiously, "Kill the mare, kill the whore." In Argentina, the Spanish words for mare and whore (yegua and puta) are the most vulgar expressions used to refer to women in general and Fernandez in particular. Experts say that the interference could only have been carried out from a plane in flight and by someone who has access to two secret military passwords. Opposition will head key congressional committees The legislature had already begun the summer recess, but, on Dec. 10, it rushed to elect Camara de Diputados officers in a tumultuous session in which the opposition came together to make decisions going against 184 years of custom in the lower house. In Argentina, the first in line of presidential succession is the vice president, who is also Senate president.

Next is the Senate vice president, traditionally a senator from the governing party. Third is the president of the Chamber of Deputies, traditionally a deputy from the largest bloc in the chamber.
Although the opposition was unable to impose its choice for chamber president, third in line of succession, it did manage to put one of its members in as chamber first vice president.

Thus, for the first time in history, a member of the opposition who was not elected to that post could preside and would inherit the rights of the office in the event of the death or incapacity of the chamber president.

The opposition will head 25 of the 45 congressional committees, leaving only 20 in the hands of the governing coalition, but even in those they will be the minority. To pull off such a power grab, the opposition obtained the votes of 11 parties that go from right to left ideologically and disregarded the governing coalition's position as the largest bloc, with all opposition parties together holding only a slight majority (132 to 125), when they vote together.

Joining this destabilization campaign and promoting a covert coup more subtle but as brutal as that in Honduras, agree the majority of analysts, have been small leftist parties and self-marginalized trade sectors of the two union confederations that represent, between them, 92% of union workers.

They include Trotskyite groups that theoretically oppose the government for reasons that seem antagonistic to the right but that "are useful to the pro-coup sectors and objectively serve their interests," said Deputy Martin Sabbatella, one of the most respected figures on the left. "Wouldn't the coup plans already have been defeated if those sectors had maintained the political identity that they claim to have?" asked Sabbatella.

**US diplomat causes stir**

Since the June elections, some high-ranking party leaders have launched a rumor campaign regarding supposed violent government plans aimed at annihilating the opposition. No proof was offered for either the theory or the deeds or the words by leaders such as Deputy Elisa Carrio whose mental health is questioned by many analysts who is irresponsibly consulted by the mainstream media almost daily so that she can throw out her dire but never confirmed predictions.

"That is coupism, sheer coupism," said Cabinet chief Anibal Fernandez. Nevertheless, those pro-coup affirmations were taken up by US Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America Affairs Arturo Valenzuela. In his first South American trip on the job, Valenzuela arrived in Argentina on Dec. 17 and repeated the discourse of the local right wing.

"Argentina lacks legal security," he said, going on to repeat Carrio's never proven denunciations. In less than 24 hours, he had been discredited and had to apologize. "Uninformed," "ignorant," and "mean spirited" were adjectives Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana used in describing Valenzuela to business leaders.

"Valenzuela is trying to serve the golpistas, but even US Ambassador in Buenos Aires Vilma Martinez cast doubt on Valenzuela’s claims when she said that 500 US businesses operate in Argentina and not one has considered abandoning its business in the country," a source from the Argentine Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores told the ANSA news agency.

-- End --