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Argentina: Government Agenda Blocked By Opposition

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Argentina is trapped in a governability crisis in which the government and the opposition have been unable to establish channels for dialogue or to agree on even the most basic issues. In this situation, the norm has become for both sides to turn to the judiciary to resolve their disputes whether they concern firing a government official, allocating Banco Central reserves, or simply enforcing a law thereby consolidating a practice of resorting to the courts to set policy. Although, since the 2009 midterm elections, sectors opposing President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner have had a majority in Congress that would enable them to impose their own policies, they cannot capitalize on this advantage. The opposition is able to unite only sporadically, disagrees on questions of substance, and has no program or leader or coherent and charismatic personality to represent it. The constitutional timetable requires presidential elections to be held in October 2011, now twenty months away. Nevertheless, encouraged by the right-wing media, all opposition parties, from one end of the political spectrum to the other, have thrown themselves into the race. But the various candidates who have initiated their campaigns, including Vice President Julio Cabos who in an unprecedented move has become the leader of the opposition attack and discredit each other with such fury that it seems doubtful that they can come together with a unified platform by 2011. The country limps along, although "in many aspects it only functions out of inertia," as a source quoted by Radio Nederland said. Many analysts ask how long the government can withstand being subjected to a climate of constant confrontation by everyone and regarding everything. Use of foreign-exchange reserves sets off confrontation On March 5, Radio Francia Internacional reported, "The crisis, unleashed early in the year by the government's decision to pay the foreign debt with Banco Central reserves, entered a new phase in which the political life of the country is again sliding along a precipice, causing a risk of an institutional break." The French public-service radio station said that when the crisis began what was at play was the allocation of a part (around 15%) of the nation's hard-currency reserves. "But this new phase deals with the exercise of power in upcoming months and in principle until the 2011 presidential elections," the report said, with a "latent" risk of a rupture to the country's democratic process. Sen. Roxana Latorre, elected as a pro-government senator but later becoming a bitter opponent of the president, went further, showing her democratic credentials and warning of the dangers of a coup. "In Congress, there is a strong pro-coup spirit that obliges us to act with utmost prudence, measuring our words, because many deputies and senators contend that the president should leave office before 2011," said Latorre. "I, like many, think that the president should leave office at the end of her constitutional mandate, not one minute before or one minute after, because to provoke an early change of power has only one name and that is a coup, a condition about which Argentina has the worst of memories, with its 30,000 disappeared sons and daughters and the surrender of the principal areas of the economy to multinational interests." Following the summer legislative recess, the opposition pulled together all its power to defeat the government on very important issues. It did so by treating all its representatives as if they belonged to the same party. It was thus able to flout the established custom that the administrative management of Congress goes to the largest minority party, in this case comfortably held by the pro-government bloc (see NotiSur, 2010-01-08). It rejected a presidential decree that authorized using the reserves to make the debt payments. When the government went around that move, the
opposition appealed to the courts. The opposition also rejected the president’s firing of the head of the Banco Central and refused to vote on the nominee to replace him. Both cases were acted upon in both the lower house and the Senate but also taken to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), ensuring that the judiciary would have to rule on an essentially technical and political matter. The opposition broke the pact reached with the government last December regarding apportionment of congressional leadership positions as well as membership in the dozens of committees of both legislative bodies. The Camera de Diputados abided by the agreement, but the Senate did not, so all Senate committees are led by the opposition and comprise a majority of opposition members. Therefore, proposals submitted to Congress by the executive never obtain the favorable report needed before they can be taken up by the full chamber. The president cannot govern according to her decisions but must adapt to what the opposition decides. Call for early change of government

In recent weeks many have explicitly demanded the early turnover of the government. Hugo Biocati, a powerful landowner, thoroughbred cattle raiser, and president of the Sociedad Rural Argentina (SRA), the association of large landowners, asked on various television programs, "Will this woman [the president] make it until 2011?" Rosendo Fraga, a political analyst considered one of the principal ideologues of the right, said, "A replacement is being sought who can do what society demands." In its March 4 edition, the 100-year-old conservative newspaper La Nacion expressed its pleasure by noting that, with the latest "movements and shakeups," the opposition had pulled out all the stops to take control of the Senate, "so that even the executive's proposals will not receive a favorable committee report, and it will be very difficult for the government to govern." It concluded, "The first big step has been taken." The newspaper left it up to the readers to decide where the "big step" was leading. Currently, at least eight opposition candidates are testing the waters, none of whom has a platform to support their presidential ambitions. All, however, have a long political history: Cabos; Deputy Ricardo Alfonsin son of former President Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989); Deputy Elisa Carrio; Deputy Francisco de Narvaez; former President Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003); Sen. Carlos Reutemann; provincial Gov. Hermes Binner; and filmmaker and Deputy Fernando Solanas. Cobos is getting the most attention, however. He is an unexciting personality whom political analyst Edgardo Mocca described in a Feb. 24 newspaper article. "In 2008, when he declared his opposition [to the government], he put forward a curious, dubiously republican proposal: to organize a consultation on his staying in office," wrote Mocca. "In those days, his spokespersons had taken political brazenness to new heights, challenging the government to impeach him. From one spur-of-the-moment idea to the next, his intimate circle intends to run the arduous race toward a 2011 candidacy using a methodology based on blocking government actions by rigorously following the playbook of the media and lobbyists for economic power. Everything fits within the format of the political drama, that is politics without policy messages, without party commitments, without any agenda other that a succession of scenes that suddenly appear and disappear, shaping the poor mythology that reigns in Argentina these days." Washington Uranga, a balanced religious-affairs observer who, this time, crossed the threshold of political analysis, wrote informatively regarding the mixed-martial-arts sport vale todo (anything goes) applied to the Argentine reality. He explained that this is a sport in which competitors resort to any means to beat their adversary. From one spur-of-the-moment idea to the next, his intimate circle intends to run the arduous race toward a 2011 candidacy using a methodology based on blocking government actions by rigorously following the playbook of the media and lobbyists for economic power. Everything fits within the format of the political drama, that is politics without policy messages, without party commitments, without any agenda other that a succession of scenes that suddenly appear and disappear, shaping the poor mythology that reigns in Argentina these days." Washington Uranga, a balanced religious-affairs observer who, this time, crossed the threshold of political analysis, wrote informatively regarding the mixed-martial-arts sport vale todo (anything goes) applied to the Argentine reality. He explained that this is a sport in which competitors resort to any means to beat their adversary. In the March 12 edition of Pagina 12, Uranga asks whether there is some similarity with the present political situation in Argentina. "Everyone [plays this game]; it is not even important to identify the actors. Everyone seems immersed in the logic of anything goes as an exercise whose central aim is to humiliate and, if possible, destroy the adversary, transforming it into the target of any type of attack, without regard for motives and circumstances. Because 'anything goes' and 'everything is OK.'" Uranga's final warning is chilling. "'Anything goes' implies a logic of extermination oriented more
by retaliation and revenge than by good sense. An irrational struggle disguised with supposedly political language but lacking rationality and political sense. Politics and society cannot accept as valid the anything-goes methodology. Plain and simply because it is based on a foundation of extermination and destruction. And humanity has already tried that path, which is one of death in every sense, and it leads only to new forms of death."

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