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Argentina: Woes Of Opposition Candidate Benefit President

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Amid the opposition's fierce destabilization campaign against the government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and just 15 months before the October 2011 presidential elections, the judiciary brought charges against the leading opposition candidate. Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri was one step from jail after a judge indicted him on charges of participating in a criminal association involved in illegal electronic espionage. Macri, a powerful businessman and former president of the Boca Juniors soccer club the country's most popular club is accused of having backed an elaborate scheme to tap the phones of relatives of victims of the worst terrorist attack in Argentine history, the attack on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA). On July 18, 1994, the building housing the city's principal Jewish cultural center was hit by a car bomb, killing 86 people and wounding and mutilating scores more (see NotiSur, 1994-07-29).

The proceedings against Macri are a significant blow to the fragmented opposition, which, until now, has been unable to agree on a common leadership and saw Macri as having the best chance of defeating the governing-party candidate, whether that be the president or her husband, ex-President Nestor Kirchner (2003-2008). News of the judicial decision on such a serious matter comes as the government is beginning to improve its image and when all the center, right, and ultraright presidential hopefuls are caught up in a game of personal ambitions that makes it increasingly difficult for a unified leadership to emerge. Implementation of a strong social program the Asignación Universal por Hijo, a monthly US$55 subsidy available for all children under the age of 18 and the sorry spectacle of an opposition that cannot agree on even minimal aspects of a common platform, has seemed to improve the government's image in recent weeks, including in polls taken by the president's enemies. Damage to Macri may be irreversible Various analysts agree that Macri will not be able to overcome the loss of prestige caused by the indictment. His 30 months at the helm of the Buenos Aires government have not produced positive results, although the major media outlets that dominate the Argentine political scene have downplayed his errors and portrayed him as the best presidential candidate. Buenos Aires today seems like an abandoned city, with its dirty streets, its broken sidewalks, its neglected parks and plazas. But that is not the worst, and, in any case, his predecessors were no better. What is really serious, what the indictment underscores, are his spending cuts in education and health and his entourage, the officials he chose to govern. * In mid-2009, after hundreds of complaints had piled up, Macri had to shut down the Unidad de Control del Espacio Público (UCEP), armed nighttime commandos created during his administration and sent on a virtual hunt to "cleanse" the city of the poor. Minister of Public Space Juan Pablo Piccardo was forced to resign. * In November 2009, two high-ranking officials in charge of setting up a Policía Metropolitana (PM) were jailed. Jorge Palacios, picked by Macri to head the PM, was indicted on charges of having participated in the AMIA bombing and for his actions in kidnapping, torture, and disappearance cases during the past decade. The PM assistant chief Osvaldo Chamorro was imprisoned on the same charges. * In December 2009, in the face of numerous complaints, Education Minister Abel Posse was forced to resign. Posse, a former diplomat who had served as consul during the dictatorship, was on the job only 11 days, a brief time during which Macri backed him completely. On the very day he took office, Posse wrote an article in the conservative daily La Nación saying that the genocidal military were "illegitimately jailed" and
that the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were "guilty of having had subversive children." As minister responsible for education, he made several public statements claiming that "young people are drugged and stupefied by rock and roll." Macri thanked him for his services. * In April 2010, former intelligence agent Ciro James was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison for carrying out the order to wiretap relatives of AMIA victims. He had been hired as a consultant to the new Minister of Education Mariano Nadrowsky, now indicted along with Macri for criminal association. Macri's indictment was announced 10 days before the huge community celebrations that attracted thousands of people around the country, convened by the government to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the 1810 Revolución de Mayo, which began the process of independence from Spain. Patriotic celebration a huge success The opposition, which seemed shell-shocked by the indictment, had hoped for an unsuccessful patriotic celebration plagued by street protests against the government so it could regroup and begin a legislative offensive that might give it possibilities in next year's election. In the weeks before May 25 the main day of the celebrations the press, radio, and television launched a subtle, undeclared campaign aimed at having people boycott the festivities and thus isolate the president from society. However, the public reaction surprised even the government. In Buenos Aires alone, the capital and second-largest electoral district in the country, 2 million people turned out to peacefully enjoy the festivities and the cultural spectacle that wound through the streets of the heart of the city for four hours, recreating famous historical events: the May Revolution, independence, the formation of the nation, the arrival of streams of European and Latin American immigrants, the passage of universal suffrage, the beginnings and the repression of the anarchist and socialist union movement, the process of industrialization, the bloody coups of the 20th century, the Malvinas-Falklands war with Great Britain, and, finally, the return of democracy with the dictatorship's terrible scars and the admirable struggle of the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo who sought information about their 30,000 disappeared children and the 500 grandchildren taken by murderous officials of the last dictatorship (1976-1983). In those days of May, as 200 years ago, the outlook seemed to be becoming clearer. The press could no longer hide the seriousness of the proceedings against Macri or the spontaneity of the public who came out to celebrate together with the government and without protesting against it. La Nación, a firm defender of the head of the Buenos Aires city government, quoted analyst Graciela Römer saying that "the telephone-espionage scandal will be a blow to Macri's image" and that "the public-opinion damage done to him could be the knock-out blow for his most ambitious project: the 2011 elections." Referring to the surprising crowd at the May 25 celebration, the independent daily Página 12 pointed out that "the government inner circles believe that the unprecedented outpouring has destroyed some myths driven by opposition sectors and amplified by some media. What happened during the holidays ended the myth that people were irritated. There was no irritation, there was not the slightest evidence of social tension." It concluded, "The people in the streets were far from being angry, repressed, disappointed, as the press kept claiming. The people were close to their leaders, in a participatory, happy, and festive frame of mind." The most reputable opinion polls all pointed out the surprisingly huge turnout. "The people showed that there is a great need to participate, and they went into the streets to be together with the president," said sociologist Artemio López, for whom the link between Macri's indictment and the holidays "will be decisive come October 2011." Doris Capurro, director of Ibarómetro, said, "For the government, this is a rebirth. Her impressive management through widely accepted measures, such as the Asignación Universal por Hijo, has given the president indisputable leadership in crafting the political agenda." The analyst said that Macri's political demise seems inevitable and shows that "the government's image improves in direct proportion to the decline in the opposition's."
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