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Andrés Gaudán

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Death of Former President Néstor Kirchner Brings Political Turmoil

by Andrés Gaudín

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Argentina's former President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) died on Oct. 27, and, along with a heretofore unimaginable outpouring of popular grief, his death produced a huge change in the country. The life of the political parties was changed, electoral periods were accelerated, and in the streets the people, particularly young people, showed, for the first time in years, that they had decided to get involved again in politics. The crowds reappeared, previously treated as if they were invisible, and, one might say, made fearful by the formidable media machinery that operates at the service of the right and the large power groups.

Kirchner's death created a huge vacuum in the divided country, where the opposition and the government have not engaged in dialogue since 2008, because the former president was expected to be the governing-party candidate in the October 2011 presidential election and because everyone in the fragmented and programless opposition thought that his death could clear the way and make it possible for them to retake the government next year.

For the governing party, the disappearance of its undisputed leader seems to have acted as a powerful cohesive agent and catalyst for political action. For those in the opposition, it was the spark that rekindled ambitions, brought to the surface differences covered over by a shared political hatred of Kirchner, and began a rapid disintegration that has, in little more than a month since the funeral, produced internal clashes and divisions in all the parties.

The ex-president's strong personality and active presence in the international arena also had repercussions throughout the region, which must now, besides lamenting the loss of an arbitrator in critical situations, find someone of his stature to replace him as secretary-general (NotiSur, Aug. 21, 2009) of the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR).

Kirchner's rise from obscurity

In 2003, Kirchner made it in big-time politics and captured the Argentine presidency after being governor of Santa Cruz, an intensely cold and windy province in the extreme south of the country that was basically irrelevant in national politics, with only 0.54% of the population and the world's largest penguin colonies (NotiSur, May 23, 2003). Kirchner's political enemies pejoratively called him "the penguin," which did not upset him.

In his May 25, 2003, inaugural speech, when he summed up all his promises with the short phrase "to govern is to include," few believed him. Argentina had just endured five short-lived presidencies in the space of two years and had embarrassing indicators for a rich country: 23% of the population was unemployed, and 57.5% were poor and undernourished, although the country's bountiful lands could produce enough food for 300 million people.

Today, Kirchner's pithy phrase can be seen as a portent of things to come: unemployment was reduced to 7.6%, and poverty dropped to 11.8%. When Kirchner first took office, he was considered
only the latest in the volatile succession of presidents beginning in December 2001 when the violent crisis brought crowds into the streets in sharp anti-government protests. "Que se vayan todos" (they all must go) was the slogan that began in the streets during the protests (NotiSur, Sept. 6, 2002) and lasted until the new president began to show that he was capable of governing by including and not marginalizing, as had been the norm during the previous half century.

Historically, Argentina was a country of violent antagonisms, but, since the end of the last dictatorship (1976-1983), the civilian governments had benefited from a climate that fostered antagonisms but not enmities. With Kirchner, things changed. The opposition defined him as an enemy and acted on that premise. So much so that, the day after his death, presidential hopeful and Deputy Ricardo Alfonsín, son of former President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989), in a momentary lapse during a TV interview, said, "How could Kirchner's death not sadden me if even the death of Saddam Hussein saddened me?"

Clearly Alfonsín's comment paled in comparison with what, hours after Kirchner's death, Nick Chamie, global head of emerging markets research at RBC Capital Markets, said, according to Reuters: "It's sad news, but we view it as generally positive for Argentine asset prices....Given that we have the elections next year, I think people will start to raise expectations that someone more market friendly from the opposition will have better odds."

Given its lack of leaders and programs, the opposition acts according to the ideological line laid down by multimedia outlets headed by dailies Clarín and La Nación and is nothing more than a mouthpiece for the large corporate interests and power groups represented by those dailies.

**To govern is to include**

For jobs to return and poverty to drop, for the phrase "to govern is to include" to be a reality, Kirchner had to go up against many powerful interests, the same ones that are now trying to profit from Argentines eating and working.

Kirchner broke with the IMF (NotiSur, March 11, 2005) and (Jan. 13, 2006). He renationalized public services that had been privatized in the 1990s (mail, water, air transportation, administration of pension and retirement funds). He established a universal allocation in which the government provides all parents of children under age 18 with a monthly stipend equivalent to slightly more than US$100 per child. He increased retirement benefits and pensions by 612%. He annulled the laws preventing the trial of persons accused of crimes against humanity during the last dictatorship, and he turned Argentina into a world model on that issue (so far, 131 killers have been sentenced and imprisoned, 783 have been indicted and detained, and 377 are in the oral-trial stage and are also jailed.)

Kirchner applied a clear policy against racism and discrimination that culminated last year with the passage of a law legalizing same-sex marriage (NotiSur, July 30, 2010). He pushed to remove corrupt judicial structures. He integrated Argentina into the region, backing the customs union of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the creation of UNASUR. He ended once and for all the "carnal relations" with the US, an aberrant phrase uttered by former President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) to explain his subservience to policies ordered from the White House during the administrations of former US Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. With the administrations of Kirchner and his wife President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who succeeded him in 2007, the state was reborn
There are many, and not insignificant, actions that explain why, rather than harvest good and necessary adversaries, Kirchner generated powerful and evil enemies.

To accumulate the enormous political power that he had acquired when death took him by surprise, Kirchner had built from the bottom. First the foundations, supporting social organizations, human rights agencies, gender-based groups, the forgotten world of science and culture, the still healthy deep pockets of the labor movement, common men and women who had never participated in politics and finally abandoned the slogan "they all must go" to shout, at the time of his death, a phrase loaded with commitment: "Thanks, Néstor, strength, Cristina."

"He built with the best," wrote columnist Mario Wainfield in the Buenos Aires daily .

"The most laudable and healthy in politics, social movements, science, the arts and culture accompanied the president is these sad hours," wrote Alberto Dearriba, an opinion writer for the tabloid .

Kirchner's death, and the collective sadness it caused, brought out the multitudes who had been treated as if they were invisible, made fearful by the offensive of the large multimedia groups that orient the right. In the weeks after Oct. 27, with the flood of citizens who began to accompany President Cristina Fernández and call for her to run for a second term, the opposition warned for the first time that a return to power was not as likely as it had once thought.

The opposition panicked, and panic, as one knows, is not a good counselor. On Nov. 30, Congress began its summer recess, and the opposition had been unable in an entire year to get a single measure passed. What is more, it did not introduce one important piece of legislation. It will be unable to show society where all its efforts went or explain what it was doing during the entire year. It will only be able to exhibit a sad family portrait.

**Opposition unity collapses**

Kirchner's death and the overwhelming appearance of the people in the streets, determined to get involved in politics, unleashed a war of ambitions that pitted all the opposition parties and presidential hopefuls against each other. This division has also reached the corporations—large landowners against small agricultural producers, industrialists interested in foreign markets against small and medium-sized producers who want to consolidate their positions in the domestic market, national banks against multinationals, importers against exporters—which, in the last two years, with Clarín and La Nación as cheerleaders, have played all their cards to destabilize the constitutional and democratic government.

"The opposition in the Congress is definitely split," was La Nación's headline on Nov. 21. And it lamented, "While the governing party seems together, anti-Kirchnerism is inexorably obliterated amid mutual resentments and jealousies."

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