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Political Opposition Unable to Unify Ahead of Presidential Elections

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Eight months before presidential elections, Argentines are being subjected to a barrage of campaign advertising aimed at both raising the public profile of potential candidates and putting on the table issues that, at least theoretically, should be debated during the electoral campaign. Candidates' photos and slogans already cover walls throughout the cities. Television and newspapers treat the candidates as if they were international sports or entertainment stars.

The governing party will run President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner for election to a second term (2011-2015). For the opposition, the scene is chaotic. At least a dozen candidates have thrown their hats into the ring, which will force the traditional Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), with three aspirants, and Peronismo Federal, with four, to hold primary elections.

The opposition has been unable to settle on one candidate to represent it or even create a mesa de unidad similar to that which encompasses the disparate right in Venezuela. This has led to speculation that the campaign leading to the Oct. 23 election will come down to a contest between President Fernández and all twelve opposition candidates. The polls all indicate that, if the election were held today, the president would be re-elected in the first round with no need for a runoff. But the election is a long way off.

**Right’s destabilization efforts continue**

The opposition, which since March 2008 has subjected the government to an unrelenting and dangerous destabilization campaign that pushes the limits of the most elemental democratic principles *(NotiSur, Aug. 1, 2008)* and *(Oct. 24, 2008)*, continues its efforts without assessing the serious institutional consequences. Without a leader and without a platform, the right's agenda continues to be that of the large corporations and the two most powerful media groups in the country, led by dailies Clarín and La Nación. Everything indicates that the opposition has accepted the media's campaign proposal and believes that, by continuing the anti-democratic campaign, it could obtain the votes that now elude it.

"This will undoubtedly be a dramatic year in which the opposition and the media resort to all the dirty tricks that they have shown they are capable of using," said professor Ricardo Forster. As the days go by, no one doubts that Forster's troubling opinion is the product of a rigorous examination of reality.

Since mid-December, Clarín, La Nación, and the opposition and corporate leaders have unleashed a series of serious events that have even resulted in deaths. They demonstrate their enormous economic power and try to create chaos. First, they encouraged groups of people from poor barrios to occupy parcels of land on which, they told them, they would build low-cost houses. They then arranged for other people to try to dislodge the squatters. Three people died, but they did not succeed in provoking a government crackdown against the homeless.
Second, they engineered a series of electricity blackouts just as the high summer temperatures had pushed up demand. Third, they incited an attack by groups of thugs against one of the oldest and most beautiful train stations in the city of Buenos Aires. Once again, the government did not repress the attackers, despite the serious damages that they caused.

Then the opposition turned its destabilizing actions toward winning over the middle class, as they were doing their Christmas shopping and preparing to begin their holiday vacations. Fuel shortages in the large cities (only in the large cities), prevented people from filling their automobile gas tanks, and the most commonly used denominations of paper money went out of circulation (only in the large cities), impeding operations of ATM machines and complicating commercial activities.

While polls show that the tactics did not bring the right more votes, they did instill a feeling of insecurity. However, the destabilizing tactic that had the greatest impact occurred during the second week of January, when for seven days large agricultural producers (of wheat, soy, corn) halted sales to cut off one of the government's major revenue sources. They were protesting a government export control intended to prevent domestic shortages that arose because producers were taking advantage of the soaring international prices and exporting all their product. The producers wanted to show that if they chose to do so they could make it difficult for the government to meet its obligations—everything from state-workers salaries to pensions for the elderly.

The press has succeeded in convincing the public that the domestic economy is based primarily on agriculture. Consequently, such scare tactics are accompanied by alarmist reports of possible shortages of flour, meat, and milk, three products that are expensive throughout the world but massively consumed in Argentina.

Relations turned south in 2008

Corporate agriculture undoubtedly has enormous power and is historically used to receiving major privileges from the government. Such is its power that, for the 2009 legislative elections, it set up legislative training schools to prepare its best leaders to become deputies and senators (NotiSur, March 27, 2009). About 20 were elected to Congress with the express mandate of passing legislation to eliminate all taxes on agricultural production, as well as on industrial production and financial transactions.

The bad relations between the government and corporate agriculture first became evident in March 2008, when the president issued Resolución 125, which increased taxes on agricultural exports—common in many parts of the world and already in place in Argentina. With the help of the media and all opposition lawmakers—from the ultraright to the "progressive" left—the producers defeated the administration culturally and politically, leading to a resounding electoral defeat some months later that left the governing party in the minority in Congress.

Meanwhile, producers associations assumed the leadership of an arrogant opposition that went so far as to "demand"—unsuccessfully—that President Fernández turn over the government to Vice President Julio Cobos, a mediocre and little-known political figure whose only "merit" was to betray his own administration, voting in favor of the corporations and against Resolución 125.

The hostile climate of 2008 dissipated as external and climatic factors ushered in a new reality. Following the 2009 drought, the normalization of rainfall resulted in record-high yields in all crops. International grain prices rose notably.
In 2010, the Argentine economy improved, production and employment rose, and the governing party regained popular support. Meanwhile, the agrarian leadership became entangled in internal contradictions causing it to lose its initiative, which it tried to recapture—unsuccessfully—by halting grain sales.

Corporate interests, aided by Clarín and La Nación, did not know how to hold onto the gains made in 2008 and 2009. The most graphic example—caused basically by differences that began to appear between large and medium-sized producers—was their inability to get a bill passed to do away with the export taxes.

"For reasons that largely went beyond taxes, the press and the large and medium-sized producers joined together against a popular government, but they could not come up with a common policy," wrote analyst Alberto Dearribia in the daily Tiempo Argentino.

The political blocs reproduced the picture of differing interests that existed among the producers. Finally, the government's export restrictions, which tended to separate domestic prices from international ones, served as an excuse to resume the alliance between corporate agricultural and the political opposition for the purpose of testing, through the destabilization tactics, whether society would give it new credence in the October presidential elections.

The opposition found it difficult to go against the government's objective of "protecting Argentines' ability to put food on their table," for which it first limited exports of milk products, then beef, and finally wheat and all other grains. It could not deny that the elevated international prices offered such high profits that, if the state did not intervene, it was willing to export its entire production—unless Argentines were willing to pay the same prices for milk, meat, and bread that were paid in euros or dollars in Paris or New York.

Thus, at the beginning of this election year, the opposition thought it was a good time to take back its lost leadership. The press, political opposition, and corporate agriculture said that halting grain sales was a "symbolic measure but one with political impact." Despite their failure, top agricultural leaders said, "We're going for more." With which they meant that they will not stop until they have a government that does not intervene, that is, the type of government political analysts call the "estado bobo," the stupid or uninvolved state.

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