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Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Could Win Second Term

by Andrés Gaudín

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Argentines will elect their next president on Oct. 23, 2011, and everything—voter-preference polls, support from sectors that have until now kept a distance from the presidential contest, a fragmented opposition, lack of alternative proposals—indicates that President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) will be re-elected for a new four-year term. The country's power groups and the principal media outlets—which have become ideologues and engines of the opposition to the president's progressive program—refuse to accept this. Consequently, Argentina is going through a complex situation.

"Without measuring the consequences of their actions," said Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman, "the government's enemies do not waver in their statements or in their actions and employ all the power of the media and their international connections to generate permanent and dangerous conflicts on the foreign front, where the country is positioned as never before, with a recognized and commended democracy, which is thought of in the highest terms."

The head of Argentine diplomacy was referring to two brief but powerful episodes in which relations were jeopardized with two countries with close ties to Argentina: Switzerland and Israel. Meanwhile, the electoral timetable is moving forward with early balloting in several provinces (in all cases, with auspicious results for the governing party), and the government continues governing and making decisions that boost its approval ratings.

The Argentine Constitution requires that the presidential election be held on the same day throughout the country. In legislative or provincial elections, however, each governor is free to choose the date, generally one based on convenience, although the pretext for moving local elections ahead of the presidential balloting is always the same: to prevent mixing major national issues with local issues.

Early voting shows president in good shape

For this reason, voting will take place somewhere in the country each month until October. The first provincial election was on March 13 in Catamarca (northeastern Argentina), followed by Chubut (in the south) and Salta (in the far north). In the first two provinces, candidates allied with the Fernández administration seemed to have no possibility of winning. The opposition used its apparent lead to present the voting as a plebiscite on the president's future. However, in both cases, the governing party did surprisingly well. It won in Catamarca, where a coalition encompassing all opposition groups has governed for the past 20 years. It lost in Chubut by a mere 320 votes in elections deemed fraudulent in some districts, which must vote again. In Salta, governing-party candidates won with nearly 60% of the vote.

The wide-open situation gave all opposition presidential candidates cause for reflection. Former President Eduardo Duhalde (2001-2003) did not engage in self-criticism but was emphatic. "CFK is
running alone," he said. "The opposition has no candidates and nothing structured. We must start over."

Current Vice President Julio Cobos, at odds with the president and a would-be opposition candidate, said, "Catamarca and Chubut are provincial elections, but they had a national impact and sent us a powerful message that one must know how to interpret. We cannot be naïve and say that this doesn't oblige us to rethink everything."

After the debacle, the Chubut governor, a member of the president's political party but now estranged from her, withdrew his nomination bid.

Another hopeful, Felipe Solá, former governor of Buenos Aires province—the largest electoral district in the country—was brief but categorical. "There is an overwhelming 'Cristinista' wave," he said, referring to the president.

Ricardo Alfonsín, son of former President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) and candidate for the traditional Unión Cívico Radical (UCR), made a strange analysis, the result perhaps of the impotence with which the opposition sees the future. "The president does very well in the polls and in the provincial elections, but most people want a change," he said.

**Opposition looks at political landscape with dismay**

The conservative daily—which together with the populist acts as spokesperson for and advisor to all the opposition, from the left to the ultraright—expressed regret on March 21 for the performance of its preferred candidates. Before the Salta elections, the paper had said that Catamarca and Chubut "would have to wake up the opposition if they hope to make a strong showing for the presidency in October."

The paper said that, in two districts where two weeks prior to the election opposition candidates were leading comfortably, the results were very different. "All it took was for CFK to go [to the districts] to strengthen her candidates a week before each vote and the opposition's advantage vanished. In the Casa Rosada [government house], they talk about the unstoppable CFK effect, and the opposition has nothing and no one with ability, imagination, and ambition for power who can challenge the president with any real possibility of winning," said a columnist for the paper. "The opposition will have to rethink its future."

On April 20, 's star columnist Joaquín Morales Solá, a journalist loved by the right, sounded the alarm to wake up the opposition. He was harsh with everyone. He revealed that leading businesspeople refused to make campaign contributions to the opposition "because they don't believe in anyone." He said that those political sectors "are now just an alliance of leaders without strength or territories." Morales Solá spoke of "skeletal forces" and concluded that, "jumping between error and embarrassment, the opposition has reached, perhaps, its maximum level of impotence."

Analysts agreed that the impassioned statements of Morales Solá, master of archaic and formal language, best illustrate the inability of the government's enemies to put together a platform and find a common candidate who is respected by the establishment and society.

Throughout all this, and without the president saying as yet whether she will run for re-election, the government continues governing and has implemented measures that have maximum popular
support. On April 15, the Fernández administration announced the creation of a special fund to ensure the elderly with a minimum pension access to medicine at a 90% discount.

On April 18, it established a special US$55 a month stipend for all pregnant women—"Argentines by birth or by choice, naturalized or resident"—who work in the informal sector or in domestic service.

In early March, the government launched a huge labor-inspection campaign in rural areas to uncover any slave labor in the fields of the principal opposition leaders and the large transgenic-soy-seed and agrochemical multinationals such as Nidera and Syngenta. The Salta opposition candidate was among those caught in the raids and, after verification of violations, saw his image drop rapidly.

On March 20, authorities suspended from the grain-trading registry a group of large multinational grain exporters that the government says defrauded it of US$77 million in taxes through "toxic triangulations of foreign-trade operations, apocryphal receipts, operations through tax havens, and financial maneuvers abroad." Among the five corporations sanctioned were multinationals Dreyfus, Bunge, and Cargill.

But perhaps the most popular of the recent measures was the government's decision to lift restrictions and demand to be allowed to participate on the boards of 42 companies—steel, banks, oil, gas, electricity, food, clothing, and transportation, among others—in which the state is a shareholder. It also demanded payment of US$1.6 billion in unpaid dividends since 2008.

The voluminous and heterogeneous state holdings in the business sector began in 2008, when the Fernández administration nationalized the retirement system (NotiSur, Dec. 12, 2008). At that time, the state acquired all the assets of the private retirement-fund entities (Administradoras de Fondos de Jubilación Privada, AFJP).

The opposition also lost on this issue. In the face of a legitimate government decision, the opposition opted to stir up the specter of the "Venezuelanization" of the country, and it failed to notice that the public was sympathetic to the measure.

In an Ibarómetro poll, 84.9% of Argentines approved of the appointment of state directors in the 42 companies as a way to exercise voting rights regarding shares acquired during AFJP nationalization. The poll showed another significant fact: 61.3% of respondents approve of the state investing in Argentine firms and want to see increased state participation in private businesses.

On April 24, exactly six months before the presidential election, the four major consulting firms released results of their respective polls. In all cases, President Fernández led the two principal likely opposition candidates by between 22 and 35 percentage points, sufficient to win in the first round. The Argentine Constitution has a peculiar runoff system: the winner of the first round can avoid a runoff if he or she obtains more than 40% of the valid votes and leads the second-place candidate by more than 10 points. In three of the four polls, CFK met those conditions.

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