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Andrés Gaudàn

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Argentina's Presidential Race Enters Home Stretch

by Andrés Gaudín

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With the registration of eight slates of candidates, Argentina’s political parties have begun the final lap of an electoral process that will conclude on Oct. 23. On that day, nearly 29 million voters will choose the president who will govern the country for the next four years, half the members of the Cámara de Diputados, and one-third of the senators.

Before arriving at the final destination, however, and for the first time in the country’s history, the electoral calendar calls for a stopover on Aug. 14, when all parties must participate in obligatory, simultaneous, and open primaries. Any party that does not obtain the support of at least 1.5% of voters will not be allowed to participate in the presidential elections.

Despite that and other innovations of the election law (Ley de democratización de la representación política, la transparencia y la equidad electoral) passed in 2009, perhaps the most notable, and for many analysts the most dangerous, factor in the elections is the role assumed by the major media. Given the double reality of a fragmented and programless opposition and their confrontation for business reasons with the administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), the private newspapers, radio stations, and television channels have become ideologues and even teachers or mandators of the disparate and weak opposition, which, nevertheless, represents the interests of the most powerful sectors of Argentine society.

Polls predict easy win for CFK

President Fernández will run for re-election to a second consecutive term, which the Constitution allows. All polls indicate that she will win comfortably. In early July (public-opinion firms release their findings every two weeks), polls indicated that the president would win in the first round, without need for a runoff, with an overwhelming lead over whomever comes in second. Second place could be captured by the ticket headed by Deputy Ricardo Alfonsín, son of former President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989), the last great leader of the century-old Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), the country’s oldest political party.

Argentina's unique electoral system, designed in 1994 to satisfy the interests of then President Carlos Menem (1989-1999), establishes a runoff system that differs from the usual, in which a candidate must obtain 50% plus one of the valid votes to win in the first round. In the Argentine version, as throughout the world, the two candidates with the most votes in the first round go to the runoff. But in Argentina, a runoff is unnecessary if the first-place candidate obtains 40% of the votes and leads the second-place candidate by more than 10 percentage points.

Polls indicate that, if the election were held today, Fernández would obtain more than 46% of the votes, leading Alfonsín by more than 30 points. The trend seems irreversible; it has held steady since early this year.

Good economic indicators translate to popular support

Fernández's lead is not explained by simply the lack of an opposition with a unified platform and solid leadership. The president’s administration can take credit for some excellent indicators,
especially economic figures. They include good employment numbers, unprecedented levels of hard-currency reserves, implementation of a policy to protect industry, consistently high domestic consumption, international credibility that puts Argentina on a par with Brazil, a strong presence on the international stage, and credit assistance for small and medium-sized businesses (important job creators).

To offset an inflation rate that it has been unable to tame (official statistics put annual inflation at about 7%, but private consultants talk about a rate of 25% to 30%), the government counters with its good job-creation performance (unemployment has dropped from 21.5% in 2003 to 7% today), an increase in Banco Central reserves (at the end of June, they stood at US$52 billion compared with US $18 billion in 2003), an effective social safety net that has reduced poverty and indigence (from the 47% living in poverty in the wake of the huge financial crisis in 2001-2002, the level is now 9.8%), and a stipend provided to parents for all children under 18 years of age, conditioned on fulfilling certain commitments, which has reduced by 12.3% truancy and drop-out rates in primary and secondary schools.

In addition, President Fernández can point to some successes that define her ideologically and show a coherency between what she says and what she does. Chief among them, a human rights policy that has served as a model throughout the region and the state's renationalization of several public enterprises privatized during the neoliberal euphoria of the 1990s [postal services, water utilities, the flagship airline, parts of the railway network, and what is perhaps the most stunning achievement of her first term—renationalizing the retirement and pension system (NotiSur, Dec. 12, 2008)].

**Opposition unable to come together**

The opposition, which got a lot of traction in 2008-2009 from the confrontation between the large rural producers (whom they joined) and the government, assimilated many of the principal leaders from the agribusiness chambers and thus succeeded in getting the dominant media to ensure that they would receive "good press."

But since the 2009 midterm elections—in which the administration suffered a resounding defeat (NotiSur, July 10, 2009)—opposition groups have tried to act in unison in the two houses of Congress but have been unable to establish a common agenda. They have failed to use their majority in both houses to promote common projects or generate political consensus around a platform that could appeal to society (NotiSur, Feb. 11, 2011).

On the contrary, the opposition has been unraveling and today has seven candidates, six of whom represent practically the same interests that in 2009 gave it overpowering momentum that seems unstoppable.

"In the opposition's few proposals, personal interests and electioneering speculation weigh more heavily than interest in developing an integrated program," said political analyst Jorge Arias in a dialogue with the Spanish news agency EFE.

In a commentary in the conservative Buenos Aires daily, Rosenda Fraga, director of the think tank Nueva Mayoría, said that the opposition has already missed the train of history

During the two years since the midterm elections, the opposition first formed two fronts, which split as soon as election candidacies began to be discussed. One comprised several rightist provincial
caudillos, emerging from the old Partido Justicialista (Peronism). The other was made up of the parties identifying themselves as "progressive."

The first front disintegrated when personal ambitions got in the way, and the leaders exchanged accusations of corruption and of violating the most basic ethical principles. They began to hold provincial internal elections to choose a common presidential candidate, but denunciations of fraud arose in the third primary and the process ended abruptly.

Skirmishes began within the second front in late 2010, but they exploded on June 2, when the two parties remaining in the negotiations—the UCR and the Partido Socialista (PS)—announced their definitive split. The motive? The UCR had announced that Alfonsín had signed an agreement with rightist businessman Francisco de Narváez, a leader of that first front comprising old Peronists. The PS said, "More than an ethical failing, that alliance is the result of unbridled personal ambitions and an incoherence that tramples all the principles that had favored negotiations and dialogue with the UCR."

The old UCR leadership also rejected the agreement. They considered it "a surrender to interests that are not those that historically have given life to radicalism."

Not surprisingly, beyond the alliance with a rightist leader, Alfonsín's agreement with de Narváez meant that the UCR would no longer use its century-old slate number (3), it would change its traditional color red that has distinguished it since its founding in 1891, and, more significant, it abandoned its name to call itself the Unión para el Desarrollo Social.

Two of the seven opposition tickets are from the extreme opposite ends of the political spectrum—one is neo-Nazi and the other appears tied to a number of groups with Trotskyite roots. The two risk not being on the ballot because they may not obtain the required 1.5% of votes in the August primaries.

Despite Argentina's respect for basic democratic norms, and in this the government cannot be blamed, the country's future concerns many analysts and political observers. They fear the absolute domination that the president's Frente para la Victoria (FpV) could end up with, not because CFK has authoritarian tendencies but because, as of Dec. 10, when she takes the reins of government from herself, an administration will begin with the foundations of what it has done until now but without opposition. It will have to deal with criticism, of course, but the role of prosecutor that the opposition must exercise in any democracy will not be in the hands of any party but simply in the hands of local caudillos. And the press.

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