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President Cristina Fernández Poised to Win Re-Election

by Andrés Gaudín

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On Aug. 14, Argentines experienced something new in an electoral process—open primaries—prior to the Oct. 23 general elections, and President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) reaffirmed her leadership and emerged just one step away from re-election to a second four-year term (December 2011-December 2015).

The president's overwhelming showing plunged the opposition into, not self-criticism in the face of its deplorable performance in the primaries, but rather an exchange of accusations and reproaches that threatens to fragment it even further. The president won in 23 of the country's 24 provinces, both where her Frente para la Victoria (FPV) is in power and where it is not, and in some provinces she obtained more than 80% of the vote. She won in all districts where she faced competition from the main opposition leaders and candidates put up and financed by the business chambers, especially in rural areas, to defend, if they won, their backers' interests in both the provincial governments and in Congress.

Nationally, the president obtained almost 51% of the vote, compared with 12.1% for each of her two closest rivals and 10.2% for the fourth-place candidate, a lead of between 38% and 40%. The other parties—six in all—received an insignificant percentage of votes. The president also won in all agriculture and cattle-ranching regions where, in the March 2008 crisis, the producers and soy exporters acted so strongly against her that they even attempted to destabilize her government and asked her to step down from the post to which she had been elected just 100 days earlier (NotiSur, April 11, 2008) and (Aug. 1, 2008).

The president's victory at the polls also completely discredited the major media—basically the conservative daily and the powerful Grupo Clarín, which owns approximately 100 media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, news agencies, over-the-air and cable TV channels, and radio stations—and left them without discourse. They had assumed the role of dictating the ideological and argumentational line to the opposition parties, agricultural-producer groups, and chambers of multinational businesses.

Open primaries change the game

What happened? For the first time, the electoral law (Ley 26.571, Democratización de la Representación Política, la Transparencia y la Equidad Electoral), also called the open, simultaneous, and obligatory primaries law or PASO, was in effect. Under this law, all parties have to hold open primaries on the same day, so that voters can choose candidates for the general election (NotiSur, July 22, 2011). Among the objectives of the law, passed unanimously by Congress in December 2009, is having society exercise some control on party life by determining not only which of each party's candidates will be qualified to run but also by making some selection.

The law's backers said that it would prevent the proliferation of slates, as occurred in the 2007 presidential election when there were 13 candidates, most with little national support.
The law also stipulates that candidates who do not receive at least 1.5% of the total vote in the primaries are excluded and must wait to try their luck again in the primaries for the next general elections.

A third provision of the law, which legislators saw as very positive during the debate prior to its passage, establishes that any participant for a given party in the primaries cannot be a candidate for any other party or alliance for two years. This is particularly important in Argentina because it is common for leaders to switch parties, making a mockery of the decision of the citizens who elected them to represent them for a particular party.

"After having voted for the law in Congress, the opposition accuses the government of putting into effect a law that requires a minimum of 1.5% support, and they say that this outlaws a party. In any case, it's the citizen who outlaws [a party] when he or she votes," said Interior Minister Florencio Randazzo, rebutting an opposition that systematically challenges, without noting, as in this case, that it was involved in writing and passing the law.

In the 2007 presidential elections, CFK obtained 45.3% of the vote, winning in the first round to continue the policies of her husband, former President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), who died in 2010 (NotiSur, Nov. 2, 2007) and (Dec. 3, 2010).

After almost four years in office, CFK obtained 50.7% of the vote in the August primaries. With a similar result in October, she would be re-elected in the first round and could even lose 10 percentage points between now and the election and still not have to face a runoff. Why? Because the runoff system in Argentina is unusual. It stipulates that the two candidates with the largest number of votes face each other in a runoff—with two exceptions. One, when the first-place winner has more than 40% of the vote and leads the second-place candidate by at least 10 percentage points. Two, when the first-place winner has at least 45% of the vote in the first round, regardless of other candidates’ results. If CFK maintains her Aug. 14 numbers, she can win outright on Oct. 23 and begin her second term on Dec. 10.

**Legacy of "the K governments"**

It is common to hear references to "the K governments," an accurate description despite having being coined by the media and used pejoratively. And that is how the opposition uses it. A continuity between the administrations of NK (Néstor Kirchner) and CFK is expressed in all areas and is the product of a political philosophy that the couple maintained since their youth, when they both were active in the student movement in the difficult decade of the 1970s during the dictatorship.

Both administrations developed an economic plan that broke with the economic theories of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), implemented job-creation and social-inclusion policies, created a strong state presence in key areas of national life, and renationalized public businesses privatized in the 1990s. The reform of a judiciary that was profoundly corrupt and permeated with political power and the defense of human rights and fundamental ethical values have defined these eight years. A policy of openness to the world and by definition a symbol of regional integration round out some basic aspects of both administrations. That record was, undoubtedly, what caused Argentines to vote so convincingly in the PASO.
Some candidates recognize the impossibility of reversing the August results in October, and the rightist media do not hesitate to reproach the opposition that has not had a convincing narrative to win the electorate's sympathy.

Economist Javier González Fraga, the vice presidential candidate for the Unión para el Desarrollo Social, (UDESO), which came in second, recognized the difficulties that the opposition will have in finding new votes. "Retirees received an increase in benefits that are now 10 times what they were eight years ago, 5 million low-income families receive a stipend for each minor child, unemployment has dropped, and half of salaried workers are in the formal economy and have their unions. I think that when this panorama is examined, one has to say, 'October will be very difficult.'"

The pro-opposition newspapers were harsh. The day after the election, Aug. 15, La Nación's headline read, "An incompetent and defeated opposition." A story on the second page said, "He is not here, she is, and she has no rivals." Four days later, on Aug. 19, the same paper asked in a front-page headline, "Is there life after the knock-out of the primaries?" also asked a question—"What now?"

Despite González Fraga's intellectual honesty, that is not the message the newspapers are sending the opposition parties. On the contrary, they are dangerously playing with economic and political destabilization. Until now, Argentina has successfully avoided the global crisis, although no one denies that at some point the country will feel the stinging blows from the situation battering the core countries.

Counting on such an outcome, said, "The country has enough reserves to last only until October, the government has no plans for beyond that." followed the same line, "After October," wrote one of its economic analysts, "the situation in the country will become critical."

At the same time, they fear that the avalanche of votes in August will act as a trigger and in October CFK will obtain even more votes, which would mean an increase in the number of pro-government legislators. Thus, using the exact same words, the two newspapers both said on Aug. 20 that, "with a Congress dominated by the government, the country's institutionality is at risk."

With this level of rhetoric, and above all with the predisposition to play any card to defend certain interests, from now to Oct. 23 the media and the opposition seem willing to reserve a difficult future for the country.

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