5-31-2013

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Despite Elite's Opposition, Kirchnerismo Still Has Wide Popular Support in Argentina

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Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2013-05-31

Ten years after former President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) began his political project, which his wife, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, continued after his death in 2010, and five months before the Oct. 27 legislative elections, the political climate for Argentines continues to be exhaustingly tense, with an opposition that has the backing of all the powers that be.

In addition to the rightist media, agricultural, industrial, and union organizations, and the judiciary, the opposition also has support abroad, from the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) and US TV network CNN to personalities such as 2010 Nobel laureate in literature Mario Vargas Llosa and European dailies such as El País (Spain) and Corriere della Sera (Italy). Only the armed forces remain on the sidelines in this dispute, defending democratic institutionality.

Amid a virulent smear campaign, based on unproven daily allegations of corruption, the government continues to enjoy high approval ratings, and the opposition—a collection of parties that range from progressive to various degrees of centrist to the far right—is unable to weave a unifying program that can electorally challenge the continuation of "Kirchnerismo."

While the president continues running the country and sending Congress bills aimed at consolidating the current democratic model—including allowing young people to participate in political life at age 16, enacting rules to reform the questionable judiciary apparatus, and introducing measures to defend the currency—the press and opposition parties and affiliated groups have launched an over-the-top destabilization campaign that often borders on pro-coup positions.

"It is obvious that such a level of confrontation, which some academics call 'pro-overthrow' activities, can only be explained because Kirchnerismo has touched very powerful interests or has implemented inclusive policies that have increased citizen participation in majority sectors of the population that were marginalized before 2003," said sociologist Ignacio Ramírez, an analyst for consulting firm Ibarómetro.

Lowering voting age called electoral ploy

Among Kirchnerismo's "mortal sins," Ramírez cites that of having awakened young people's interest in politics. To be able to vote at age 16, adolescents needed to register before April 30. Almost two-thirds of the 780,000 young people eligible to register did so. Since voting is optional for those between 16 and 18 years of age, it is estimated that the new voters will represent no more than 1.5% of those going to the polls in October.

Youth leaders of all parties support expansion of voting rights as an act that strengthens democracy. The only one opposed was Patricio Isabella, youth leader of the traditional Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). Isabella voiced a surprising position: "We'll have to see how many registered to vote and how many were registered without their knowledge to use them to carry out electoral fraud in October." No one responded, but neither did any leader of his party—once the cornerstone of
Argentine democracy—remind him that support for lowering the voting age had been a UCR position.

On May 2, Ramírez wrote an interesting analysis in his column in the daily Página 12. "The importance of the youth vote must be examined from a symbolic not a numeric perspective," he said. "Even though the choices that might predominate [among young people] will not have a significant impact on the overall elections results, the number of newly registered voters must not be interpreted as just one more piece of data; many signs support the contention that it represents a sector that wants to participate in the [political] life of the country. Expanding rights promotes political participation and involvement."

Isabella's statements come within a very particular context in which some are calling for the overthrow of the government, others denounce the violation of basic rights such as freedom of speech, and still others spread the most destabilizing rumors.

**Opposition statements verge on calls for coup**

On April 6, during a meeting of rural business people, one producer said, "The government has to go, by hook or by crook." Another said, "We must stop the government, and after we get rid of it see how to distribute rural wealth among producers." A third suggested "not selling grain or paying taxes until the end of June, and also blocking roads to increase public anger and so the government cannot pay its bills and will have to go." The most extreme voices said, "We aren't going to change this by negotiating. We need this government to go, and it doesn't matter if it is by being kicked out. There are psychological and direct actions to topple the government and get rid of all this mess."

None of the leaders of the four large national producers organizations, present at that meeting in a city in the central province of Santa Fe, interrupted the speakers to call for common sense. Jorge Chemes, producer and UCR deputy, went even further, saying, "Like in war, you have to kill those on the front line, to sweep away the dirt and then cut off the hands of all Kirchnerists." Chemes was not alone. His colleague Ricardo Buryaille, also a UCR legislator, said, "It's necessary to hammer them, really, really hammer them, so that they go."

The day that Congress was to pass the judicial reform, Deputy Elisa Carrió of Coalición Cívica (CC) called for surrounding the building to block the vote by force. The media gave ample coverage of these and other anti-democratic demands, but so far the SIP and the same media continue to say that there is no speech or press freedom in Argentina.

The opposition has the support of other external allies besides the SIP. On April 12, Vargas Llosa spent a few hours in Buenos Aires. He gave interviews to international news agencies and media from the powerful Grupo Clarín and said, "With pain and concern I tell you that in Argentina there are serious symptoms of the breakdown of democracy, with a very strong offensive that is trying to silence the independent press." The writer said that his source of information was "the independent dailies, like Clarín."

**TV journalist goes after late president's image**

On May 5, on his program on Canal 13, owned by Grupo Clarín, commentator Jorge Lanata quoted the late President Kirchner's former secretary to allege that he had set up a network to divert large amounts of money to Uruguay. In the following days, the former secretary denied Lanata's allegation.
On May 12, on the same channel, Lanata said that Kirchner had ordered that enormous vaults be built in his house where he hid "tens of millions of euros, the fruit of corruption." Again, Lanata's "sources" quickly denied what he said. Lanata closed his program dramatically, saying, "They want to take over Grupo Clarín and kick me out of all media. If something happens, do something. I don't ask you to do it for me, I ask that you do it for you." He repeated this three times.

Two weeks later, Grupo Clarín had not been taken over nor had Lanata been kicked off the air. What's more, on May 19, he again repeated his allegations. This time, he said that Kirchner had used state funds to buy soccer players that he then gave to his dream team. Again, the charges were denied.

Despite the furious anti-democratic campaign, support for the major government measures is overwhelming. In evaluating the last decade, sociologist Robert Bacman said Kirchnerism is supported by three pacts with society: the first deals with economic reactivation and employment gains; the second is based on the new role of the state; and the third on human rights policies.

In 2003, 62.2% of workers feared losing their jobs. Today that figure has fallen to 12%, and unemployment is below 7%. In an interview with Página 12, Bacman said that the revitalization of the state shows up in various ways. One is primary and has to do with equity; it is the Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH), a US$85 conditional cash transfer for children under 18, which 71% of the population support. Renationalizations have significant support: the renationalization of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) has the approval of 74% (NotiSur, May 4, 2012), Aerolíneas Argentina, 64% (NotiSur, June 26, 2009), the private retirement funds (administradoras de fondos de jubilaciones y pensiones, AFJPs) 62% (NotiSur, Dec. 12, 2008), and the water service 72% (NotiSur, April 7, 2006).

"What rounds out the assessment of the decade," said Bacman, "is the mark on the judiciary and human rights. The decision to radically modify the composition of the Corte Suprema has the support of 64% of the population, and in human rights at least 77% agree with the policies implemented by Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, who annulled the pardons for the perpetrators of the genocide of the last dictatorship (1976-1983) and encouraged trials of those responsible for crimes against humanity."

-- End --