Argentina's Polarization Continues Ahead of October Midterm Elections

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Argentina's Polarization Continues Ahead of October Midterm Elections

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On Aug. 11, amid an intense media campaign against the government, which more than once crossed the line to assume destabilizing characteristics, Argentines voted in the second simultaneous primary elections (Primarias Abiertas Simultáneas y Obligatorias, PASO) in the country's history. PASO is the process for choosing candidates for the Oct. 27 midterm elections, in which half (129) of the Chamber of Deputies and one-third (24) of the Senate will be elected.

Although PASO's aim is to determine which groups are eligible to participate in the national election—the eligibility threshold is 1.5% of the vote—and which faction has the lead within each party, it is clear that, in the context of the unsustainable polarization, the results lend themselves to other speculations. Some will say that President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK)—leader of the Frente para la Victoria (FPV)—came out the winner because the FPV received more votes nationally than any other party. Others will say that she suffered a defeat because the combined tally of the opposition groups—from the far right to the left—was greater than that of the FPV. But neither analysis is correct. Both are erroneous readings of a complex mechanism put in practice in 24 districts that does not allow a single interpretation.

In the wake of PASO, the only serious conclusion is that, for the government, the final numbers are a clear wake-up call, and, for the opposition, they spotlight a new political actor (Sergio Massa) who came on the scene with such high visibility that it is now clearly impossible, because of the deep differences, for the enemies of the process led by the president to unite under one banner.

Massa was CFK’s Cabinet chief until he was fired for reasons that are not entirely clear. He is mayor of Tigre, a Buenos Aires suburb, and did not leave the FPV until two months ago, after the opposition media built him up as a potential national leader. He then formed a political group with other FPV dissidents and beat the FPV candidate to run for the lower-house seat to represent Buenos Aires province.

Midterms a portent of October outcome?

Deputies and senators will be elected in October, but everyone is aware that all groups have their eyes on the 2015 presidential elections. The seats being filled are for those elected in 2009, the worst election of the Kirchnerismo decade (NotiSur, July 10, 2009), which began with the 2003 election (NotiSur, May 23, 2003) of the late President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and continued after Cristina was elected in 2007 (NotiSur, Nov. 2, 2007). This means that the governing party has less at risk than the opposition and could expect the president to emerge from the election still holding a majority in both houses. She will need to manage institutional structures and will have the tools available to govern and maintain her legitimacy and also allow her to find the best way to handle her own transition.

In 2015, the president will have completed two consecutive terms, and the Constitution bars a third term. If the PASO results are repeated in October, the specter of a CFK re-election, conjured up
by the opposition, will disappear forever. Although she will continue governing with legislative
majorities, the president, even if she wanted to, would not have enough support to amend the
Constitution and run for another term.

But CFK—the undisputed leader of Kirchnerism—will be the great elector in 2015. Alberto Dearriba,
an analyst with the Argentine daily Tiempo, wrote on Aug. 12, "Since the establishment of the four-
year tem, midterm elections have predicted the results of the presidential elections two years later.
Barring a political earthquake, the electoral map in October will be very similar to that intimated by
PASO. But that scenario could be altered if the person with the highest voter-preference numbers
(CFK) cannot compete in 2015."

Dialogue to strengthen legacy

Three days after the primaries, CFK proposed opening an in-depth debate and, using popular soccer
lingo, sitting down with "the real owners of the ball" to discuss the economic model and policies.
The president spoke harshly of opposition leaders, whom she described as "employees" of the
bankers and industrialists.

Two days later, they were all at the same table: the president, her Cabinet, the major business
chambers, bankers, and union leaders. During those meetings, CFK spoke of the need to
"strengthen the industrialization model, university education, investment policies in science and
technology, administration of workers' resources so they can begin to consume again and reactivate
the economy." She warned, "I will not last forever, and the policies that have led to our successes
will not last forever, either. They can change; that's why I speak of strengthening them."

After the first two rounds of conversations, the parties expressed satisfaction and, surprisingly,
agreed that "inviting opposition leaders would be ill-advised, because so far they have shown that
they don't have much to offer," said a spokesperson for the Unión Industrial Argentina (UIA).
A member of CFK's advisory team said, "This is a way to move the focus of the discussions and
separate out the slogans to get to ideas."

The participants' misgivings toward the rightist leadership are well-founded. The media that
monopolize information have become the opposition's ideologues; since 2009 they have developed a
brutal campaign to discredit the government. So far this year, they have flirted with destabilization
directly, which the administration describes using an extremely graphic word, although not found in
any Spanish dictionary. It speaks of a destituyente campaign, which in old Latin American political
jargon means promoting a coup.

The opposition plays daily with the exchange rate, for example. In Argentina, the black-market
rate—what the Venezuelan opposition calls the dólar lechuga(NotiSur, May 3, 2013)—went from
being the historic "black dollar" to become the "blue dollar." The opposition manipulates—up
or down—the exchange rate with false announcements, such as the resignation of ministers who
never resigned or "the effects of the invasion of Syria," although nothing of the kind has happened.
Nevertheless, the economy suffers, causing real damage. Decisions are stopped or delayed pending
a clarification of the situation.

It could be said that the media and the opposition lead destabilization actions every day. What is
most difficult to understand is that small investors are caught up in the stories. The official exchange
rate is about 5.6 pesos to US$1.00, but it is 9.7 pesos on the "blue" market. However, establishment
economists say that the real exchange rate is 6.4, that is, if there were a change of government, the dollar would be worth 6.4 pesos, 3.3 pesos less than those people were paying last week.

The exchange rate is just one example. In the weeks before the PASO, a series of destituyente events occurred. On July 25, two former Army officers sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity were transported 2,000 km to be treated for "skin problems" at the Hospital Militar in Buenos Aires. Various accomplices, including many active-duty officers, facilitated their escape, and they have not been seen since. What infrastructure was necessary for this to happen?

A week before the PASO, Todo Noticias TV channel reported that, in early January, on her return from Hanoi, Vietnam, CFK "made a stopover in the Seychelles to sign papers to launder dirty money of an unknown origin." It seemed a strange story; no one goes 16,000 km to sign anything. Earlier, the same channel showed supposed plans "for an enormous vault in one of her mansions, where the president keeps millions of dollars that she has obtained during her presidency (NotiSur, May 31, 2013)."

The channel also quoted a former secretary as saying that "every day bags of dollars come and go from the presidential residence, which Cristina hides in the vaults." In addition, Eduardo Sadous, a former ambassador to Venezuela, got into the game and told the channel that a parallel embassy exists in the legation in Caracas where "they do the president's dirty business." On Sept. 4, Sadous was indicted for perjury, as were the architect of the supposed vaults and the former secretary.

However, the most serious incident occurred on Aug. 14, when former neurologist Nelson Castro, now a journalist on Todo Noticias, looked directly at the camera and, after a lengthy harangue against the administration-backed media law because "it is dictatorial and threatens freedom of expression," addressed the president, saying, "Madam President, your doctors are very worried about your emotional health. They were concerned on the Sunday of PASO and on Monday, Tuesday, and today. Know that, be aware, listen to them. It is important that your mental health be perfect, and it is not. You are suffering from hubris syndrome, the illness of power."

The serious warning was replayed by the 183 media outlets of Grupo Clarín—owner of Todo Noticias—and the rest of print media, radio, and television controlled by the opposition, but no one ran the opinion of Mario José Molina, president of the Federación de Psicólogos de la República Argentina, who said that hubris syndrome does not exist.

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