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Buenos Aires Gov. Daniel Scioli Favored in Race for Argentine Presidency

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Barring a political tsunami, the last Sunday in October—or Nov. 22 if a runoff vote is necessary—Daniel Scioli, the governor of Buenos Aires province and a member of the ruling Frente para la Victoria (FPV), will become the next president of Argentina. That’s what is indicated by an analysis of the results of the open primaries (Primarias Abiertas, Simultáneas y Obligatorias, PASO) held Aug. 9.

Scioli, backed by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), gained a clear advantage over candidates of the other parties on the political spectrum—notably over right-wing Mauricio Macri of Propuesta Republicana (PRO). Macri is mayor of the city of Buenos Aires and darling of the business establishment and is generously promoted by the dominant media, enemies of the government, headed by the dailies Clarín and La Nación, which own a wide network of radio and television stations (NotiSur, March 21, 2003).

Scioli and his running mate Carlos Zannini got 38.5% of the vote in the primaries, putting them just 6.5 percentage points from what would be enough for a first-round victory in the election. Zannini, a former guerrilla fighter and now legal and technical secretary to the president (Secretaría Legal de la Presidencia), is considered the architect who developed the political and economic model that CFK continues and her late husband, former President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), began.

In these primaries, considered the most complete survey on a national level, Macri came in 14% below Scioli, or 8.5% below if one adds the 5.5 percentage points of the other two candidates that belong to his alliance. In third place, at 20.6%, was Sergio Massa, CFK’s former chief of staff who split from the party four years ago. When Macri and Massa launched their candidacies, Clarín and La Nación conceived of a unity platform with the two running together. But as the weeks passed they were shown to be two irreconcilable candidates, meaning that, in the case of a runoff, neither can count a priori on the other candidate’s votes.

Primary elections relatively new

PASO elections—open, simultaneous, and obligatory primaries—were established by the Democratization of Political Representation Law (No. 26,571) in 2009, but the first time they were held was in the 2011 presidential contest (NotiSur, Sept. 2, 2011, and Sept. 20, 2013).

While PASO guarantees that all parties participate in elections with candidates chosen by citizen voters and not in secret meetings of party leaders, it has other interesting points as well. It requires a party to receive a minimum of 1.5% of all votes cast in order to present its candidates in an election, a requirement that small parties denounce as restrictive. In a country where it is common for a leader to move from one party to another, the law requires politicians who change parties to wait at least two years before running under their new party. And it established mixed polling stations. All citizens vote at the polling place based on their place of residence, regardless of gender or age.
The provision for a runoff existed previously. It was established in 1994 within the framework of a constitutional reform tailor-made for the interests of President Carlos Menem (1989-1999), the dominant political figure of the time. It established for the first time the possibility of presidential re-election as Menem wanted, but did so somewhat capriciously. It put two conditions for winning in the first round and avoiding a runoff. One, if the candidate obtains 45% plus one vote, he or she is considered the winner. Two, if the candidate gets 40% plus one vote and surpasses his or her nearest opponent by 10 percentage points, that person is also proclaimed the winner.

Of the 15 presidential tickets that participated in the most recent PASO, only six topped the 1.5% threshold. For the first time since the end of the dictatorship in 1983, the Trotskyist Partido Obrera, which had become viewed as merely picturesque, was left out of the running. Reduced to its minimum expression, it was replaced by other groups that are also small but ideologically more trusted by the leftist electorate.

Opposition candidates vow to change laws

The primaries were characterized by the conceptual poverty of the candidates, who limited their campaigns to repeating a minimum of proposals. Last February, Macri, Massa, and other potential opposition presidential candidates signed a document promising that, should any of them be elected, they would repeal the fundamental laws approved during the Néstor and Cristina Kirchner presidencies.

What’s at stake is a package of about 50 texts that include everything from social welfare programs and reforms to the civil and commercial codes to human rights norms and regulations regarding the renationalization of the postal, water, and energy services, oil and airline firms, and retirement funds that were privatized in the neoliberal era in the last decade of the 20th century.

Scioli, a politician who avoids definitions, promised vaguely "to support everything in the model of those years that should continue, change what must be changed, and correct what must be corrected." As for something new, he proposed creating a development bank and two new ministries, one for the popular economy and the other for human rights.

Analysts warn FPV to stay alert

Although everything seems to point to a Scioli-Zannini victory, some analysts believe that the FPV should be alert. Such is the case of political analyst Hernán Brienza, a member of the ruling party, who warned that "the competitiveness of the ruling alliance eroded in the last two elections." Brienza wrote in the daily Tiempo, "There are signs one can be optimistic but there are others that indicate that one should remain in a state of alertness."

Among the positive points, Brienza cited the results of 20 of the 24 national districts in which the FPV triumphed, but he warned that in the Buenos Aires province—the country’s largest electoral district with 37.1% of the total electorate—"the situation for the FPV isn’t serious, but if it doesn’t make a real assessment of the situation it could commit some errors that would be costly."

In the last four elections, the province has been volatile, and, despite its historic allegiance to the ruling party, in elections for legislative posts it has voted for the opposition. In the recent PASO, the PRO candidate took an unexpected 31.9%, a total never before reached by a candidate on the right.

The days before the PASO were tinted by a dirty media campaign never before seen in which Clarín played all its cards to benefit Macri and Massa and finally Macri. First, it alleged Economy
Minister Axel Kilcillof collected several government salaries, notably, one for US$40,000 a month as a member of the board of the YPF oil company. That turned out to be false. Just days later, the paper, sticking to the conditional tense, printed a large, front-page headline alleging that Máximo, the president’s son, had secret accounts of several million dollars in Swiss banks. That also turned out to be false.

Two weeks before the primaries, the daily said that the state airline was in crisis and had cancelled hundreds of flights and rescheduled others at the height of the winter vacation season. That was false. It couldn’t even show classic photos of the airports full of furious passengers as happens when such problems are real. Finally, and most seriously, seven days before the primaries, it accused CFK’s Chief of Staff Aníbal Fernández of belonging to drug mafias and having ordered the assassination of three drug traffickers. All this was printed while saying that the government violated freedom of the press and expression.

Having occupied the presidency for two consecutive terms—the second ends Dec. 10—CFK is ineligible to run for a third term. Nevertheless, she was the major political figure during the PASO process. In January, Clarín charged she had supposedly covered up the alleged participation of Iranian diplomats in the 1994 terrorist bombing of an institution of the Jewish community in which 85 people died (NotiSur, July 29, 1994). Her rating fell at least 30%, but after the lie was exposed, she rebounded. Today more than 50% of Argentines would vote for her if she were able to run (NotiSur, Feb 6, 2015, and May 8, 2015).

In an Aug. 7 dispatch, Associated Press correspondent Peter Prengaman described CFK as the grand elector and referred to the participants in the PASO as figures overshadowed by a president whose popularity continues to surge even during the campaign. The candidates in opposition parties, he wrote, "have gone from criticizing the spending behind Fernandez's social welfare policies, including energy and transportation subsidies and perks for poor, single mothers, to instead talking about modifying the programs or even building on them."

Prengaman quoted María Victoria Murillo, a Columbia University professor and expert on Argentine politics, as saying, "Previous presidents at this point were lame ducks. Fernandez is not. She continues to be very effective."

Two days after the primaries, Argentine analyst Roberto Caballero said in a radio program that he wanted to point out "a curious thing about PASO: the winner on Sunday, Aug. 9, was not a candidate of anything, CFK was the elector of the Scioli-Zannini ticket."

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