Opposition Antics Questioned Ahead of Argentina’s Presidential Elections

Andrés Gaudán

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Opposition Antics Questioned Ahead of Argentina’s Presidential Elections

by Andrés Gaudín
Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2015-10-02

Argentina’s upcoming presidential election should be cause for celebration. For a record eighth-straight time, citizens will have a chance to choose their leader democratically rather than have the decision made for them by the military, which last held power between 1976 and 1983.

And yet, as the Oct. 25 vote approaches, the atmosphere in Argentina is anything but jubilant. Why? Because the radicalized right, the de facto powers, and the major media outlets, which, since 2008, have led an opposition front that has used more than just words to attack President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), have become so extreme that they are now essentially holding the government and the country’s sovereign institutions hostage (NotiSur, May 8, 2015).

So argued journalist Roberto Caballero, one of Argentina’s most respected political analysts, during a program aired by the state radio station and widely disseminated through social-media networks. The dangerous phenomenon taking place (32 years after Argentina suffered through the worst civic-military dictatorship in its history) follows the pattern of what a number of Latin American observers call neogolpismo (new-coupism), a form of political action that challenges the legitimacy of a given government—the CFK administration in this case—not by questioning its democratic origins but by lamenting its supposedly authoritarian practices.

This year alone, Argentina has been shaken by a spate of accusations, all coming from the same rumor mills: the right-wing press, certain major political-party leaders, social networks, judges and prosecutors, and business associations. In early January, a prosecutor accused CFK of helping cover up the worst terrorist attack in Argentine history: the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires where 85 people died (NotiSur, July 29, 1994). When the prosecutor turned up dead, apparently by his own hand, critics accused the president of plotting his "murder," according to the tabloid Clarín, and committing "institutional magnicide," according to the daily La Nación (NotiSur, Feb. 6, 2015). A series of courts, including the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), later dismissed the claims.

In the following weeks, the same two newspapers suggested that CFK’s son may have laundered several million dollars stashed away in secret Swiss bank accounts. Argentina’s Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Nilda Garré was also named in the scandal. At Argentina’s request, the Swiss bank in question clarified that neither of the two holds accounts there. The president’s son was also accused of carrying out shady real estate deals, and the administration’s Cabinet chief Aníbal Fernández has been implicated in crimes committed in connection with Mexican drug cartels.

Torched poll stations
Just when it seemed that the allegations—now that the Oct. 25 vote is so close—might finally dry up, results from a local election in the northern province of Tucumán added a bizarre new twist to the anti-government antics. There, gubernatorial candidate José Cano of Cambiemos—a diverse
alliance of rightist sectors led on the national level by presidential contender Mauricio Macri, the mayor of Buenos Aires—was crushed by a pro-government candidate, losing by more than 110,000 of the nearly 900,000 votes cast.

Right-wing militants responded by burning 43 voting stations. The alleged perpetrators, arrested and awaiting trial, said they had been promised "good money by the Cano people" to carry out the arson attacks. Cambiemos, in the meantime, took the absolutely unprecedented step of presenting the Contencioso Administrativo, a provincial dispute tribunal, with a complaint officially alleging election fraud. The tribunal, even though it has no jurisdiction in electoral matters, make the quick and extreme decision of annulling the elections and ordering a revote—this time using a different system, electronic voting, which, in part because of problems encountered in countries such as Holland and Germany, where it is banned, is used only in Buenos Aires, the capital.

The CSJ intervened and delivered an incisive ruling blasting the Tucumán judges who "argued that they were defending popular sovereignty but ended up hurting the sovereign expression of the 897,630 people who participated in the provincial election." What the events made clear, nevertheless, is just how committed the opposition is to throwing obstacles in the way of the Argentine political system’s democratic development.

"The fraud claim isn’t about this particular election, about the act of voting and counting votes. It’s about the image the opposition leaders [Cambiemos] want to paint of their adversaries [the CFK government]. It’s part of a conscious strategy of discrediting the winners, the electoral system, democracy itself," wrote analyst Luis Bruschtein of the Buenos Aires newspaper Página 12.

The high court never used the word neogolpismo. But it alluded to it by noting, in its ruling, that the Contencioso Administrativo "exercised powers that are by no means in its domain."

Fernández, CFK’s Cabinet chief, was even more direct in his assessment of the situation, telling reporters Sept. 15, "The goal of the opposition is to discredit the elections and the democratic system." Echoing warnings issued previously by Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (NotiSur, Sept. 19, 2014), Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera, and Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, a Brazilian diplomat, Fernández made it clear that "we are facing a situation that has also occurred in other countries, that doesn’t even seem to be an Argentine-born plan but rather one developed in other countries, specifically a certain country in the north, with the goal of making the election seem illegitimate and endowing it with other characteristics."

Arguing along the same lines, José Alperovich, the outgoing governor of Tucumán, accused the opposition and its allies in the judiciary of "carrying out an attack on democracy, [orchestrating] a true coup against democracy." Alperovich, who hails from the same party as the election winner, went on to say that the opposition "tried to discredit the act of voting itself, and the voting in particular of 900,000 citizens who opted in favor of a government that is legitimate, constitutional, and democratic."

**Cohesion problems**

Regarding electoral matters, the Argentine federal Constitution allows each province a certain amount of autonomy to establish its own rules. Among other things, authorities in the 24 constituencies can choose their own elections dates.
So far this year, the first in Argentina’s political history in which the entire opposition joined forces in hopes of defeating the seemingly invincible governing party, 10 provincial elections have taken place. Cambiemos had hoped to win five of the gubernatorial contests. Instead it won just two. Worse still for the opposition group is that it lost in two of the countries four largest constituencies, suggesting that even united—in a coalition that stretches from the Macri-led right to the Trotskyist left—the opposition cannot defeat the followers of the CFK government.

Somewhat predictably, the poor showing has produced schisms among Cambiemos member parties. In the more-than-century-old Unión Cívica Radical (UCR)—a member of the Socialist International—two veteran leaders broke with the faction allied with Mauricio Macri to form a new party. In the Frente Renovador, which formed as a split-off from the CFK-led Frente para la Victoria (FPV), a number of "repentant" leaders have distanced themselves from the dissident group and returned to the fold of the governing party.

The Partido Socialista (PS) and even Macri’s Propuesta Republicana (PRO) have experienced defections as well. In the former, the divisions are ideologically based, while, for PRO, the problems have to do with ethics issues: its top two deputy candidates for the province of Buenos Aires, the country’s largest electoral district, were forced in early September to drop out of the race when they were shown to have committed serious acts of corruption. In addition, the Cambiemos candidate for intendente of Mar del Plata, Argentina’s top beach resort city, is facing a backlash—and recently backed out of a campaign debate—because of his past as a dictatorship-era government official, for racist comments he has made, and for his defense of torturers and other human rights abusers.

Against this backdrop, three people—of a total of six candidates—head into the Oct. 25 election with hopes of making a real splash. The governor of Buenos Aires province, Danieli Scioli, represents the FPV. His running mate is Carlos Zannini, a former political prisoner with a solidly Marxist background who is considered by many to be the ideologue of the governing party. Cambiemos will be represented by Macri, a rightist businessman who served eight years as the mayor of Buenos Aires and has a pair of legal cases hanging over his head, one regarding corruption claims and the other for allegedly ordering illegal telephone tapping. The third contender is Sergio Massa, a former CFK Cabinet chief who broke off to form the Frente Renovador. The front-runner, according to polls, is Scioli. A second round, should it be necessary, will take place Nov. 22.

-- End --