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Neoliberals Replace Kirchner’s Rule in Argentina

by Andrés Gaudín

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Argentina is changing its government. Moreover, within a week, on Dec. 10, a new conservative president affiliated with neoliberalism will take office with plans to make a break from three consecutive administrations – the first, Néstor Kirchner’s (2003-2007) and two more led by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015) – characterized by distributive economic policies that favored stabilizing the buying power of wages and the creation of real jobs (NotiSur, May 31, 2013, and Aug. 21, 2015).

Official results show that Mauricio Macri, leader of the Cambiemos (Let’s Change) alliance that united nearly all of the opposition, beat the candidate of the party in power, Daniel Scioli of the Frente para la Victoria (FPV, a redefinition of the old Partido Justicialista, the “peronismo” created in the late 1940s by three-term president Juan Domingo Perón [1946-1955, 1973-74]). The meager 2.8% margin will force the new head of state to moderate the adjustment program he had proposed during the campaign. (This lead will likely shrink once the final tally is in – although, to be clear, the lead will become smaller but will not challenge the Cambiemos victory.)

Two things stand out from the balloting held Nov. 22: It was Argentina’s first presidential runoff election, and it set a record as the eighth consecutive election in a country where, since its origin, the military has regularly interrupted the democratic processes.

Victory by narrow margin

After Dec. 10, nothing will be the same as it was during 12 years of “Kirchnerism.” However, the slight advantage with which Macri will take office forced the president-elect, in a matter of just a few hours, to at least revise the wording of his proposals. Now, in addition to maintaining the policy of human rights based on the triumvirate “Memory, Truth and Justice,” a hallmark of the three Kirchner administrations – and a policy Macri always criticized – he will hold off on applying the drastic and immediate monetary devaluation he had proposed, and on revising the current tax scheme.

Of course, this moderate approach is clearly temporary and determined by the fact that Macri doesn’t have a majority in either branch of Congress. Moreover, the Senate, which is the entryway for projects requiring a special majority, will be controlled by the FPV. In addition – and this points to a serious situation that will become clearer once the celebrations are over – Senator Ernesto Sanz, a founder of Cambiemos, left the alliance on the morning of Nov. 23. Sanz had broken up his own party (the 114-year-old social democratic UCR, or Unión Cívica Radical) to ally himself with Macri’s right-wing Propuesta Republicana and make way for the victorious alliance.

Senator Julio Cobos, the second ranking figure in the UCR, said, “Sanz was the most important man of all.” It’s not known what his surprising resignation hides.

In the four weeks between the first and second rounds of voting, major print and broadcast media – promoters of the Cambiemos candidate – used a series of public opinion polling organizations, most of them unknown, to push the idea that Macri would win by at least 10 percentage points. This led
Macri to become more direct in his proposals and to position himself as the candidate who would make substantial changes in the economy. It also caused Scioli and his team to retreat.

In response, ruling party ideologues shredded Macri’s proposals, painting them as apocalyptic measures that would do away with all the accomplishments of the last 12 years. Above all, it also caused the social sectors that had benefitted from the Kirchners’ policies – and who had not been given a role in the campaign – to take to the streets and plazas in an unprecedented effort to “defend the model.” These reactions caused many undecided voters to make up their minds in favor of Scioli.

At a victory party on the night of the election, Macri was unfocused. He knew that the 10% margin of victory had been nothing more than a campaign slogan. As his margin shrunk, what should have been a historic speech turned into a succession of clichés and phrases without political substance, leading humorists to paint him as one of those evangelical TV preachers that fill TV screens at midnight. Hours later, at 10 a.m. on Monday, Macri met with the media for the first time and tempered his discourse, offering some insights as to what his administration would be like.

**Foreign policy changes**

To the media, he detailed a radical turn on foreign policy, stepping back from the recent strategy toward the region and regional organizations. The first thing will be to call for marginalizing Venezuela from the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) and to seek closer relations with the neoliberal Alianza del Pacífico (AP), which includes Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico (NotiSur, Sept. 21, 2012). In that first press conference, Macri didn’t address the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) or the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), nor did he do so later. In a stance that harks back to the Cold War, his priorities include a re-evaluation of trade relations with China and Russia and a legislative repeal of the so-called Memorandum of Understanding with Iran, a document signed to prosecute the stalled investigation of the bloody 1994 attack on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish organization (NotiSur, Feb. 6, 2015).

Macri said he would propose “recovering” relations with Brazil, giving a new impetus for MERCOSUR, and “looking for convergence with AP” to broaden Argentina’s export destinations. In his third reference to the AP during the Nov. 23 press conference, he said, “Argentina needs to increase exports that have been halted by an overvalued peso and the recession punishing Brazil,” the country’s major trade partner. Defenders of neoliberalism and the continental political right are enthusiastic about the AP project. There is a common matrix in the AP countries, which are also signatories of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that includes Pacific Rim countries of America and Asia but deliberately excludes China. Macri’s foreign minister will be Susana Malcorra, who has been head of Ban Ki-moon’s cabinet at the United Nations. Malcorra has 25 years’ experience in various organizations in the private service sector, including IBM Argentina and Telecom Argentina, where she was CEO.

Opposition groups in Venezuela, Bolivia and other countries with progressive governments hailed Macri’s triumph as their own. And as reported by the Associated Press, they interpreted it as the beginning of a new cycle in Latin America. Leaders from small, right wing parties in Bolivia said they hope that the result of the Argentine election will strengthen their campaign for a No vote on the referendum to allow the reelection of President Evo Morales that will go before the Bolivian
The Venezuelan opposition aligned in the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) held similar hopes for the legislative elections scheduled for Dec. 6.

In Washington, Secretary of State John Kerry – who will meet with Macri’s representatives before the Dec. 10 inauguration – stressed “Argentina’s strong democratic values.” According to a report from the DPA news agency, he said, “We also remain grateful for Argentina’s leadership in the United Nations in issues such as the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the encouragement of human rights of LGBT people (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and intersex),” and recalled that both countries are long-time partners. Kerry also said the White House anticipates continuing “to work closely [with Argentina] to promote regional security and prosperity, and to enhance human development and human rights both within our hemisphere and across the globe.”

Roberto Caballero, the former editor of Argentina’s daily Tiempo, pointed out that those aren’t the only problems that Macri must face. The FPV continues to be the bloc with the clear majority in the Chamber of Deputies, it has a quorum in the Senate, and it governs in 14 of the country’s 23 provinces. In addition, its leader is still Fernández de Kirchner, who after eight years in power, leaves with approval ratings higher than Macri’s. “The close margin that assured Macri’s victory is, in a way, a restraint on his personal goals and a limit to the hawks who had predicted greater success than what the final numbers showed and who had rubbed their hands anticipating they could apply anti-popular measures from the start,” the journalist added.

Caballero concluded with a thought shared by many analysts from a broad spectrum of the media. “If anything is clear, it is that the message from the voters did not imply a blank check and that the presidential chair comes with a series of dilemmas that aren’t solved with standard self-help phrases. There’s a new president, some old problems, and a country that, though it may not please Macri, is divided 50-50 between those who supported him and those who did not. This doesn’t make his victory less legitimate, it simply will make his job more difficult.”

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