

Menem, Kirchner in Argentine presidential run-off

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The result of Sunday's presidential elections in Argentina indicates no candidate gathered enough votes to win on the first round. Former president Carlos Menem and the governor of Santa Cruz province, Nestor Kirchner—both members of the Peronist party—were the front-runners and will compete in a second round that will take place May 18. Menem, who ruled Argentina between 1989 and 1999, received 24.36 percent of the votes to Kirchner's 22 percent.

Behind them came right-wing economist Ricardo Lopez Murphy, with 16.34 percent; Elisa Carrio who ran an anti-corruption campaign, with 14.14 percent; and Adolfo Saa, a third Peronist, with 14.12 percent. Saa had been president for seven days after former president De la Rúa's resignation on December 2001.

Some 1.6 percent of voters spoiled their ballots and 0.9 percent cast blank ballots. The remaining 7 percent was split among 13 other parties including the United Left (a coalition of left-wing parties, including the Communist Party—1.75 percent), the Socialist Party (1.13 percent), the Authentic Socialist Party (0.27 percent) and the Workers Party (PO—0.74 percent). In Buenos Aires, the United Left obtained nearly 8 percent of the vote.

In comparison to the last presidential elections in which many abstained, more than 80 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, 8 percent higher than in 1998. All adult citizens in Argentina are obligated to vote.

Menem, Kirchner and Saa led separate factions of the ruling Justicialista (Peronist) party. Lopez Murphy and Elsa Carrio both had split from the Radical Civic Union (UCR), the party of former president De la Rúa. Leopoldo Moreau, the official UCR candidate, barely managed to gather 2.34 percent of the vote, the worse showing for the UCR in its history.

Regionally, in the industrial zones surrounding

Buenos Aires, Menem was soundly defeated, coming in third. In Santa Fe Province, Menem edged out Carrio, who won the industrial cities of Rosario and Santa Fe. Menem did win the industrial centers of Cordoba and San Luis. Kirchner ran strong in the oil-producing south. Kirchner carried seven provinces and Menem won in 14 others.

Murphy won the vote of the Buenos Aires Federal District, a traditional bastion of the UCR.

Both Menem and Murphy were considered "market friendly" candidates. In addition to proposing greater market liberalization and closer ties to the US economy, they also campaigned strongly for repressive police measures to stop social unrest and the increase in crime. Murphy suggested that 14-year-olds be tried as adults. Last week's poll-driven speculation that Murphy would come in second place raised stock values in the Buenos Aires Stock Exchange. The stock market responded to Monday's election results—and the entry of Kirchner in the run-off—with a drop of 8.6 percent.

Kirchner presented himself as a candidate akin to Brazil's President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, who would pursue a policy of economic nationalism and not let the International Monetary Fund dictate to Argentina. Throughout the campaign, Lula refrained from favoring any of the candidates, though his dislike for Menem is well known.

On Monday, the Brazilian president congratulated Argentina's incumbent President Eduardo Duhalde for Kirchner's showing. A Kirchner victory is widely seen as favoring closer economic integration between Argentina and Brazil, a policy favored by Duhalde, who as leader of the Peronists in Buenos Aires province is widely seen as becoming the power behind the throne in a Kirchner government.

For the second round, Kirchner is expected to seek out Carrio's supporters, while Menem courts those of Lopez Murphy.

For its part, the International Monetary Fund has declared that it will not meet with either of the two winning candidates and will await the results of the May 18 vote. The current agreement with the IMF expires in two months. The fund is expected to demand greater austerity measures to force Argentina to begin paying its \$60 billion debt. As if to signal who is really in charge, as the ballots were being counted a team of IMF technicians arrived in Buenos Aires to begin elaborating the new agreement.



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