

Argentina's ruling party suffers losses in congressional election

Bill Van Auken
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The ruling faction of the Peronist party of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner saw its vote decline sharply in Argentina's congressional elections held last Sunday, reflecting broad discontent with deteriorating economic and social conditions.

The Front for Victory (FpV) of Fernandez won just 33 percent of the vote nationwide and lost in the five most important provinces, including Buenos Aires, which includes over a third of the population. While it maintains an absolute majority in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, it is only by the thinnest of margins.

The vote was widely interpreted in Argentina as the beginning of the end for *Kirchnerismo*, the decade of rule that began with the election of Nestor Kirchner, the former governor of the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz in 2003, in the wake of the 2001 financial meltdown and the mass upheavals that followed.

His wife Cristina ran and was elected as his successor in 2007, with the understanding that Nestor Kirchner would run again in 2011. This plan was aborted when he died of a heart attack in 2010.

Cristina Fernandez Kirchner, who was reelected in 2011 with a 54 percent majority, could secure a third term only by means of a change in the Argentine constitution, which sets a two-term limit. The results of last Sunday's congressional elections appeared to preclude her securing the two-thirds majority needed to pass such an amendment.

The Kirchners have been identified internationally with the so-called "turn to the left" in Latin American politics, an amorphous category lumping together the election of bourgeois politicians ranging from Hugo Chavez in Venezuela to Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. In the case of

Argentina, the so-called turn consisted largely in the government's expansion of state spending and social assistance together with a break with the International Monetary Fund, even as it defended the fundamental interests of domestic and international capital.

This project has confronted increasing crisis, however, reflected most sharply in an inflation rate that most economists peg at nearly 25 percent, even as the government issues official figures claiming less than half that level. Last November saw Argentina's first general strike in over a decade, in protest over government tax policies that compound the impact of inflation upon the working class.

The principal beneficiaries of the turn against the Fernandez government consist of various more right-wing opponents, the most prominent of them from within her own Justicialista (Peronist) Party. Chief among these is Sergio Massa, the mayor of the upscale town of Tigre, about 18 miles north of Buenos Aires. Massa's Renovation Front gained over 43 percent of the vote in the key province of Buenos Aires, compared to 31 for the pro-government slate.

Massa's evolution provides a telling glimpse of the corrupt and reactionary character of the Peronist movement. The son of a construction company executive, he came into politics as a member of the Union of the Democratic Center (UCeDé), a right-wing big business party founded by Álvaro Alsogaray, an ardent supporter of the vicious military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976 to 1983.

Following the election of the right-wing Peronist Carlos Menem in 1989, the UCeDé threw its support behind his program of free market capitalism, sweeping privatizations and IMF adjustment packages. Massa became a Peronist, rising rapidly within the state and party bureaucracy to become the chief of the social

security office. In 2008, Cristina Fernandez tapped him to serve as her chief of staff.

With the support of big business figures and sections of the unions, Massa created his Renovation Front only earlier this year, running on a right-wing platform calling for the government to get tough on crime, pursue more “business friendly” policies and bring its foreign policy more into line with that of Washington. As part of his campaign—which obviously served as the beginning of a bid for the Argentine presidency—he contracted New York City’s former Republican mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, as a security consultant and brought him along to deliver speeches.

Also registering gains in the election was the right-wing Republican Proposal (PRO) party of Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri, which came in first in Buenos Aires and for the first time elected a candidate to the Senate. Macri used the election victory to formally launch his campaign for president.

Daniel Scioli, the pro-government governor of Buenos Aires province, who is expected to advance his own candidacy for the presidency within the FpV electoral front, has also adopted an anti-crime, pro-business platform.

In the final analysis, the elections reflect a widening polarization of Argentine society and a deep crisis of the entire political establishment and its institutions.

In addition to the various right-wing oppositions preparing for a transfer of power in 2015, the FIT, or Left and Workers Front, composed of three parties that call themselves Trotskyist, won over 1.3 million votes and more than 5 percent of the ballots cast, gaining three seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In the northern state of Salta, it captured nearly 20 percent of the vote, placing ahead of the Peronists, and in Mendoza, in the western central part of the country, it received over 14 percent of the vote.

Formed at the beginning of 2011, the FIT was initiated as an electoral bloc between three organizations: the Workers Party (PO) led by Jorge Altamira and two organizations that emerged from the breakup of the movement formerly led by the late Nahuel Moreno; the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and the Socialist Left (IS). Behind this pragmatic electoral alliance were concerns by the separate organizations that they would be excluded by changes in Argentina’s election laws that required parties to receive at least 1.5

percent of the vote in obligatory primaries in order to qualify for the general election.

The Morenoite tendency has a long and sordid political record in Argentina, adapting itself wholly to Peronism in the 1950s and then to Castroism in the 1960s (at which point it placed photos of both figures on the masthead of its newspaper). It helped prepare the tragic defeat of the working class by the military junta in 1976 by promoting illusions in petty-bourgeois guerrillaism, while simultaneously pledging its support to the Peronist government, the antechamber of the fascist-military coup.

In the 1980s, as the MAS, or Movement for Socialism, it formed electoral alliances with the Stalinists of the Argentine Communist Party through a “Front of the People”—FREPU. Following the death of Moreno in 1987, the MAS split into some 20 separate groups.

Even as the vote for the FIT reflects a growing radicalization among Argentine workers, the electoral front itself has become the vehicle for a movement towards regroupment of the Argentine left on the basis of a reformist and parliamentary outlook that can only serve as an obstacle in the preparation of a genuine revolutionary leadership in the working class for the social upheavals that are to come.



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