

The Kirchner Factor

by Andrés Gaudin

WHEN NÉSTOR KIRCHNER ASSUMED THE presidency of Argentina in May 2003 with only 22% of votes cast, few imagined his approval rating would reach 90% only weeks later, much less that such support would last. After nearly 20 months in office, he has managed to maintain record popular support. Throughout his term, Kirchner has channeled a broad spectrum of popular protest to his benefit; he has retained the banner of a progressive politician and he has succeeded in neutralizing the stubborn opposition of the old guard in his party, the Justicialista Party (PJ) of the Peronists. He also counts on his party's majority in both houses of Congress. As a testament to Kirchner's popularity, the majority of his party's leadership believes in the inevitability of his reelection and consequently supports it, despite the contest being more than two years away.

Kirchner assumed the presidency after three consecutive terms as governor of the southern province of Santa Cruz, the second-smallest electoral district in the country with less than 1% of the national electorate. Although he was scarcely known at the national level, his candidacy benefited from internal divisions within the party—for the first time in its history the PJ presented more than one candidate. The backing of then-interim President Eduardo Duhalde also helped Kirchner. Duhalde wanted the Peronists to put forth a new politician, one without leverage inside the party and without an electoral base, and someone who would respond to his directives, allowing him to be the real power behind the throne. Also motivating the interim President was his adamant desire to prevent two-term former president Carlos Menem (1989-1999) from taking back the presidency. Duhalde and Menem were, and continue to be, irreconcilable antagonists who fiercely vie for the leadership of the party. So Duhalde's support for Kirchner was basically a marriage of convenience. Indeed, they have never had a trusting



Argentine
President
Néstor
Kirchner.

political relationship, and have locked horns within the PJ over key issues—the privatization of state enterprises, for example.

To gain maneuverability for independent action in such a partisan context, Kirchner set out to create his own base of support. Divided into its factions, the PJ had no room for another caudillo. The options outside the PJ included groups and parties running the political gamut from right to left. With his narrow electoral win and the conditional support of Duhalde, Kirchner approached the different sectors of society that felt unrepresented by all parties.

According to his press secretary, Kirchner and his wife, Senator Cristina Fernández—also one of the President's main political advisors—privately admit that only by winning the sympathy of social sectors uncontaminated by the vices of the large parties will they be able to confront the right. By “the right,” they mean Menem and the ultra-neoliberal Ricardo López Murphy of the Recreate Party. In the April 2003 elections in which Kirchner garnered only 22% of the vote,

Andrés Gaudin is a Uruguayan journalist who went into exile in Argentina in 1972. He lives in Buenos Aires and writes for Latinamerica Press among others. Translated from Spanish by Teo Ballvé.

Menem received 24.4% and López Murphy 16.3%. As the runoff election between Menem and Kirchner neared, Menem's defeat was practically certain. He dropped out of the race amid his growing isolation within the PJ and a series of corruption investigations into his previous administrations.

Kirchner wasted no time. Before his verbal confrontations with the International Monetary Fund and private creditors over payments on a debt of more than \$165 billion, he set out to gain support by conquering neglected social sectors. He met with human rights groups, making him the first president in two decades of democracy to do so. He declared the non-applicability of statutory limitations on crimes against humanity committed during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and converted a building symbolic of the dictatorship into the Museum of Memory.

Within the labor movement he focused on the independent Argentine Workers' Central (CTA). The CTA was an especially attractive group because it was at odds with the General Labor Confederation (CGT), which historically acts as Peronism's union arm. Kirchner promised the CTA that he would implement the International Labor Organization's Convention 87, which ensures freedom of association and the right to organize. In essence, this would officially permit the independent CTA to negotiate for higher salaries and better working conditions on a level equal to the CGT.

He attracted progressives and intellectuals by capping rate hikes for public services privatized in the 1990s, and by discontinuing the privileges enjoyed by water and rail companies since the Menem years. Other measures catering to this sector

included terminating the concession of the Argentine Postal System, effectively returning it to state control, and the creation of a state-run airline and energy holding company. Kirchner's most popular early effort was the profound renovation of the judicial system and, specifically, the Supreme Court, which was a constant source of corruption during Menem's administrations.

As for the popular assemblies born out of the 2001 crisis and the more combative and militant *piquetero* movement of unemployed workers, Kirchner took the tack of protecting them while awaiting their natural disintegration; he was steadfast in opposing any heavy-handed responses to *piquetero* direct actions.

The popular assemblies that had occupied street corners and other public spaces, mainly in Buenos Aires, after the December 2001 crisis were already fading away when Kirchner took office. They were "victims" of their middle class origins and co-opted by Trotskyist groups—especially the Laborers' Party—whose militancy, despite their small numbers, isolated the assemblies from the rest of society. Philosopher Ricardo Forster believes the assemblies and the 2001 upheaval "have to be interpreted like May 1968 in France. It looks like they lost, that they were defeated, but underneath they created something irreversible." Forster adds, "If the 2001 protests did not break the political parties—a stated aim in their discourse—they did succeed in creating a different cultural-political programmatic environment.... They created a different sensibility."

This social activism that flowed from the December 2001 upheaval caused middle class groups, who sought access to their frozen bank accounts, to temporarily sympathize

with the *piquetero* movement. At the beginning of 2002, for example, members of popular assemblies expressed their solidarity with the *piqueteros* and received them as heroes when they would enter the city of Buenos Aires. It was an especially hot summer, and the assemblies greeted the *piqueteros* with sandwiches and refreshments. They even waved flags and threw confetti from their balconies as they marched by. But as *piqueteros* carried on with their blockades of roads and highways, they fell from the good graces of the middle classes, which historically lean to the right. In fact, the middle classes began calling for the repression of *piqueteros* for altering the rhythm of their daily lives with blockades.

Piquetero groups also began to fragment because of left-wing groups' attempts to capitalize on the movement, causing internal divisions. And their platform of demands changed constantly: one day they asked for subsidies, the next day they wanted seeds for a community garden or school supplies for their children. As traditional middle class intolerance of lower class activism resurged, Kirchner refused the demands for an aggressive response. He believed the *piqueteros* had legitimate grievances and he protected their right to protest until they tired and weakened. He rightly gambled on their eventual fragmentation, and today some of these splintered groups are important allies of his government.

The *piqueteros* were born in the 1990s deep inside the country's interior, a product of the mass unemployment created by the labor flexibilization of newly privatized state companies—above all, the petroleum industry. Gradually *piqueteros* became an urban phenomenon. Today, *piqueteros* are for the most

UPDATE

part no longer found in the country's interior; they almost exclusively reside in Buenos Aires and its surroundings. Like the assemblies, they have fallen victim to miniscule parties with Trotskyist roots, causing their atomization. Since there are now nearly 30 piquetero groups directing protest actions, mobilizations are more numerous, yet their force has diminished and they have become increasingly unpopular, particularly in the minds of inconvenienced *porteños*—Buenos Aires residents.

The most active and discredited of these groups is the Independent Movement of Retired and Unemployed Workers led by Raúl Castells, who is now on parole after recently spending two months in jail. He had been convicted on charges of extortion involving the owner of a casino in the northern province of Chaco. When detained, he first thanked López Murphy and Menem for the solidarity they had expressed upon his detention, and then, as if justice were still an appendage of political power, blurted: "The military dictatorship was more honest than Kirchner. When they didn't kill detainees, they at least told you that you were apprehended because they didn't like what you thought. But Kirchner won't admit that he arrested me because he does not like how I think." Human rights groups roundly condemned his comments, as did several nationally respected figures including Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, winner of the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize. Diverse civil society groups issued a joint declaration. "No government that usurps power is better than one chosen by the people.... Castells has finally revealed his true political convictions and society now knows what to expect from him," concluded the document.

Kirchner had no need to respond to Castells' accusations. Piquetero groups were the first to defend the President, calling Castells "a traitor." Jorge Cevallos, who leads the piquetero group Neighborhoods on Our Feet, even asked, "Who is behind Castells? Who is paying him to try and destabilize the government?"

Kirchner's broad appeal has led some analysts to wonder if he intends to distance himself from the PJ, or perhaps build his own party. But he has never said he plans to abandon Peronism. Although he is of basic Peronist stripe, he is not tied to the party establishment or its folklore. But neither has he indicated that he is pursuing the ambitious project of constructing his own political base. Nonetheless, media outlets have coined a term to describe his rapprochement with the most dynamic social sectors. They contend the President aspires to consolidate a movement that "transverses" across all sectors of society; abbreviating the concept, media have begun referring to "Kirchnerist transversality."

Echoing this idea last September, leaders with Peronist roots but distanced from its party structures launched the creation of the Coordinating Board for a New National Project. Renowned leftist journalist Miguel Bonasso announced its creation. Bonasso created the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Argentina and won a legislative seat in 2003. He borrowed the name from the political party of the same name in Mexico, where he was exiled during Argentina's last dictatorship. Joining Bonasso is fellow congressional deputy Francisco Gutiérrez, a respected metallurgical union leader, and Eduardo Luis Duhalde (of no relation to the for-

mer interim President), who is Kirchner's Secretary of Human Rights and the founder of the Memory and Mobilization Party. The Board is supposed to act as a nexus between society at large and Kirchner, in step with his transversality strategy, but in reality it is not much more than a public relations maneuver. Even some of its creators concede the project is destined for a slow death. They believe it will become irrelevant once stalwart Peronists line up behind Kirchner. Even former interim President Eduardo Duhalde admitted, "If Kirchner keeps on like this, Peronism will support his re-election in 2007."

Faster than anyone could have imagined, the President has shed his narrow mandate and now enjoys tremendous popular support. Importantly, he has become a respected leader with his own political weight and has managed to capitalize on the complex social reality that has existed since he came to office in May 2003.

"Stated simply, the opportunity for change is always accompanied by the risk of chaos," says sociologist Nicolás Casullo in analyzing the Kirchner phenomenon. "Whoever assumed the government in Argentina [at the time of the election] faced the difficult task of transforming protest into politics, of somehow institutionalizing social mobilization that was anti-institutional." Many political scientists and other scholars would agree with Casullo when he says of Kirchner: "He has managed to keep a foot both inside and outside of Peronism while trying to arrive at something else, because without a doubt we are presented with a political project that recovers and legitimizes protest." ■