

Argentina: The end of a cycle?

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The Argentine elections of April 27, 2003 left a paradoxical balance sheet; they took place amid generalized apathy and indifference and on the other hand attracted the participation of nearly 80% of registered voters. Beyond this, the results brought no surprise: the second ballot will be contested by two candidates, Menem [1] and Kirchner, both from the PJ (Partido Justicialista), who express variants of the neoliberal model without greatly altering the substance of this latter. Neither candidate gained 25% of votes cast.

These results indicate the end of the traditional bipartisanship and the prefiguration of a new party system reflecting the changes that are taking place in the employers' organizations in the country. A recomposition of alliances and the search for a new hegemony inside the bloc of the dominant classes is what is at stake.

The appeal for abstention made by some parties, smaller organizations, and 'assembleista' and 'piquetero' organizations suffered a signal defeat. Non-participation was 20%, less than the legislative elections of October 2001, but slightly superior to the presidential elections of 1999, confirming an upward tendency from 1983, but blank and spoiled votes collapsed to 2.5%, the lowest since 1983.

The parties of the left that presented candidates, IU (an alliance between the CP and the MST - it scored 1.7%) and PO (0.8%) increased their vote in relation to the presidential elections of 1999 (IU doubled its vote and the PO was up by 25%) but saw a substantial reduction in relation to the last parliamentary elections. These results did not seem to bear any relation to their participation and influence in the social movement.

What conclusion can be drawn from these results? Do they mean that the whole process that began on December 19 and 20, 2001 has been crushed by the mountain of votes? A priori, there is no doubt that this is a triumph for the dominant classes. The illegitimate and weak provisional government that emerged after the popular revolt has succeeded, not without difficulty, in guaranteeing governability and carrying through its proposed objectives. Nevertheless, do these results constitute a lasting political exit to the Argentine crisis?

In the first place, it is necessary to stipulate the objective for the dominant classes in these elections; to end the political cycle opened in December 2001, restore order, state control, and reconstitute the political regime.

Both questions, central to capitalist domination under a state of law and a regime of parliamentary democracy, had been left hanging after the days of December 19-20 and all the subsequent processes.

That popular revolt released tensions which had built up throughout the 1990s, harnessed the social expressions that had developed and allowed the appearance of others that gave form to a complex and contradictory social subject, that despite those complexities and contradictions has developed outside of the institutions and the established order, in a deep process of self-organization and autonomy in relation to the state and the governing regime.

It is this process which they want to put a stop to. The murders at Puente Pueyrredón, the imprisonment of piqueteros in the north of the country and the state offensive against the Brukman textile and the Zanón ceramics factories, occupied by workers, are part of this attempt.

A turn to the left took place in important sectors of society after December 2001. Nevertheless, neither the social nor the party political left could capitalize on it in these elections.

The left parties continued with their sterile disputes, privileging their policies of self-construction over the needs of the people, whereas the social movement seems to have arrived at a plateau. The piqueteros have maintained their mobilizations but are not spreading; the occupied factories stay occupied but the process has not extended; the assemblies did not obtain any of their great proposed objectives and many of them have taken refuge in mutual aid, understandable and solidaristic but depoliticized. The slogan "Out with the lot of them" is thus losing its social density.

What these elections show is that the movement has not managed the leap to politics and the party political left has the great responsibility of not having been able to offer the channels so that this leap might take place.

Nevertheless the reconstruction of the political regime does not only involve ending the provisional government and installing a government legitimized by the voters, but also solving the crisis of the system of political representation that has led to a deep fragmentation in the traditional parties

In this sense these elections are no more than the beginning of an electoral process that will extend until next December when provincial governors and legislators will be elected and the national Houses of Representatives and senators will be partially renewed.

On the other hand the fragmentation is not only the product of the confrontations between members of the leaderships of those parties but also an expression of the dispute between distinct fractions of capital. This dispute is not about the neoliberal model, since the essence of that is not at issue, but on projects or variants of that model.

There are two processes here that go in parallel: on the one hand the resolution of the crisis inside Peronism, on the other resolving the question of hegemony between fractions of capital in a manner that allows the presentation of a unified bloc.

Both processes interact with each other and will play a decisive role in the new party system that is being developed.

Whoever is the next president, their government will be conditioned by the character of the crisis that traverses the country, by the 'inheritance' that it will receive, by the pressure that the IMF is exerting again, and by the perverse mechanism of the external debt. On this single fundamental point there are differences on the times and the amounts needed to make an ordered and sustainable transfer of resources applicable to the payment of interest.

Finally, the next government will have to govern with a lowered level of social consensus. That, judging by the indifference of the citizenship, will have a totally passive character.

A unitary May 1

Whether the electoral process that will culminate in December constitutes a political exit strategy for the country will be seen. All the evidence is that the immediate future will be subject to tension over which bourgeois fraction imposes its project in the context of a social and political movement that maintains its dynamics of mobilization and resistance but that will have to face new challenges

and requires a process of debate and deep reflection.

For the first time in many years, a range of political and social organizations that identify with anti-capitalist politics and maintain resistance to neoliberalism put aside their factional differences to participate in a joint action on May Day. Only the CTA (Central de Trabajadores Argentinos) and the CCC (Current Clasista y Combativa, related to the Maoist PCR) refused to participate. The axis of the agreement was solidarity with the Brukman textile factory, occupied and managed by its 56 workers for 17 months and violently evacuated a few days ago. The action attracted 20,000 people and was concentrated in the area near to Brukman where workers from the company, railway workers, piqueteros and workers from Zanón spoke. Then they left for the Plaza de Mayo where they heard speeches from political and social leaders, with a worker from Brukman speaking finally. The slogans were: 'Imperialism out of Iraq'; 'neither Menem nor Kischner'; 'Brukman belongs to the workers' and 'freedom for the piqueteros imprisoned for struggling'.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Menem cut his losses and withdrew before the second round run-off.