Dispatches.

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Argentina's Presidential Elections.

On 22 November 2015, Mauricio Macri of the Cambiemos (Let's Change) coalition defeated Daniel Scioli of the Frente para la Victoria (FpV, Victory Front) to become Argentina's president. Macri is the first president to be elected in the country on a right-wing ticket since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1916. Menem, president from 1989 to 1999, oversaw structural adjustments and massive privatisations, but won office first as a left-wing Peronist with a very different set of pledges. Before then, Argentina's political right had tended to dispense with elections, with a succession of military coups ushering in conservative or reactionary regimes.

The margin in the second round was small, only two percent nationwide in the end. Nevertheless, that in a country in which voting is mandatory for all adults, and in which educational levels are above average for the region, more than half of the voters should associate their political fortunes with a multi-millionaire heir with extensive links to the banking, industrial, and commercial elite, on an platform lacking policies to appeal to the numerical majority of the population, is at least curious.

What is more, Macri defeated the chosen successor of a President, and a political movement – *Kirchnerismo* – that had made social inclusion a watchword of its tenure. Néstor Kirchner (president from 2003-2007) and especially Cristina Fernández, in her two subsequent terms, had championed policies favouring the most vulnerable sectors in Argentina: universal child benefit; laptops for schools; affordable housing; and price controls. There were measures aimed at unions and professional sectors: above-inflation wage deals; laws to support actors and artists; investment in science and technology through national research funding; and loans to purchase cars. There was also a media plurality law that attempted to de-monopolise a highly concentrated sector. Kirchnerism had attempted to reform a widely discredited judiciary. It also fostered political activism. Kirchner worked closely with existing groups such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S. Under Fernández, new youth groups such as La Cámpora flourished in support of the heterodox economic and redistributive model. This was no small achievement after the car crash of 2001, when the economy collapsed, carrying with it the whole of the political spectrum.

Macri, in contrast, could count on neither a popular pedigree, nor projection at the national level. An engineer by training, son of a wealthy Italian businessman, he had held the presidency of Boca Juniors football club, one the country's two best-loved teams. He was twice elected as *Jefe de Gobierno* (Mayor) of Buenos Aires (2007 and 2011). In the city, though, his main achievements felt

superficial: bright yellow walk-in health-check centres; a network of under-used bike-lanes; and, after much stalling, improvements to the metro and bus system. Having backed down from standing for the Casa Rosada in 2011, his attempts to form a coalition this time round had floundered. Even in early 2015 he lacked an obvious vehicle towards the presidency. Nor was he helped by the emergence of another figure, Sergio Massa, an ex-Kirchnerista on the political right, as both an opponent to Cristina and a splitter of the anti-FpV vote.

Borges, in the 1960s, remarked that he had joined the Conservative party, which was a way of saying that he didn't believe in politics. Given the absence or insignificance of such formations in modern Argentina, the opposition to Peronism has in recent years been either other Peronists (three led the race to the Casa Rosada in 2003) or, to a lesser extent, the *Radicales*, Argentina's traditionally centrist, liberal party. But a combination of fratricidal splits, going back to the 1980s and beyond, and the memory of 2001, left any Radicals aiming for the blue and white sash more or less unelectable. From out of the alphabet soup of possible alliances, there emerged the figure of Elisa "Lilita" Carrió. Carrió is widely derided in the press for her catastrophism and *ex abruptos*, for example describing Scioli as being "not like Cristina, as he's missing an arm." She stood for president in 2011 and won less than 2% of the vote. This time, she broke very publicly with her potential coalition partner, the cinema director and left-wing activist Fernando "Pino" Solanas, of *La hora de los hornos* fame. This looked like the end of her particular road. But out of the ruins of a prospective left-Radical pact, Carrió reached out to Macri. An erstwhile protégée of Ricardo Balbín, and having served in Radical coalition government under De la Rúa, Carrió gave Macri something he'd always lacked: a political machine outside of the capital.

Scioli, in many respects, was an unlikely successor to Cristina. As the poet Cristian Aliaga once wrote, "Your virtues are your faults." When Néstor Kirchner died, suddenly, in 2010, the political movement that he had co-founded was immediately left lacking an obvious candidate after Fernández's two terms. Dominating the political scene as she did, Fernández made those around her look like political lightweights, for better or worse. Scioli, a former speedboat champion, millionaire business man, and minister under Menem, Duhalde, and Kirchner, had earlier fallen out with Cristina as his star waxed as potential presidential contender. The FpV, now in sporting terms something of a one-woman-team, struggled to find anyone of similar calibre. Vice-President Amado Boudou was, and still is, embroiled in a corruption scandal. Florencio Randazzo, the (relatively) youthful Minister for Transport, was touted, but with polls not showing in his favour he was passed over. So a rapprochement took place with Scioli, and a running-mate from closer to the heart of Kirchnerism, the presidential personal secretary Carlos Zannini, was chosen. It seemed an acceptable compromise.

This though proved to be one of a series, to continue with sporting metaphors, of unforced errors. Scioli looked, for much of the campaign, unconvincing and tired, like a bad actor, not believing his own lines, as one writer described him. Aníbal Fernández (no relation) was chosen to run for Governor of Buenos Aires province. Despite his experience, in his exchanges with his much younger opponent, María Eugenia Vidal, he came across as condescending and even sexist, the very embodiment of the Peronist old guard. This played into the hands of an opponent whose watchword, and party name, was change. That Fernández also found himself swept up in a conspiracy theory surrounding narco-related murders in the province also did not help. When Vidal, minister for social welfare in the Buenos Aires government, won the province, the first women to do so, and the first non-Peronist for almost three decades, a month out from the national run-off election, it suddenly made Macri's proposition look serious.

The Nisman case has been discussed at length elsewhere, but it too played a part. Before he was found dead from a gunshot wound in his Buenos Aires apartment, the public prosecutor Alberto Nisman had levelled accusations at the FpV, including the President. Having investigated, at length and with little success, Argentina's worst act of (non-state or military-sponsored terrorism), the attacks on an Israeli cultural centre, the AMIA in 1994, he was due to face Congress to defend his assertions. As with the stories about Aníbal Fernández, there was more than a whiff of fantasy about the claims of a plot involving all the highest figures in the FpV to cover up an alleged Iranian link to the bombing. Cristina prevaricated in her response to Nisman's death and muttered dark theories. Although the eventual reform of the security services may help in the medium to long term, much damage had already been done. A lot of mud was slung, and it seemed to stick to Kirchnerism. Only the sheer weight of favourable media coverage could explain how Macri, with criminal charges hanging over him for illegal wiretapping, revelations of dubious contracts for media services to campaign insiders, and personal links to local sweatshops, could be regarded as some sort of anti-corruption candidate. But for the many of those marching in the Nisman demonstrations, or in other anti-government protests, he was just that. Nisman's own links with the American secret services and a bank account abroad, where he is suspected of having deposited money through a front man who happened to work for him – and who was allegedly the last person to see him alive – do not lessen the gravity of his suspicious death, whether it was a suicide or a political murder.

Néstor Kirchner, it is said, once told a group of journalists what he thought was the secret of success in politics: pick the right enemies, and only start a fight when you know you can crush them. It is also said that in a meeting with José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, then fledgling Spanish socialist president, he gave the following piece of advice: jail Manuel Fraga. Put some Francoists behind bars. One thinks of Néstor's dramatic order to remove the portraits of the de facto presidents from the walls of the

Navy Academy: a brilliant *coup de théâtre*, but against forces by then widely discredited and lacking the teeth to bite back. Néstor tended to promise little, and deliver much, with his major successes, such as renegotiating Argentina's foreign debt, effectively by brinkmanship with its creditors, coming out of leftfield.

Cristina Fernández's approach was always different. She spoke publicly often and at length, with a pedagogical and confrontational edge that could enlighten but also infuriate. Commentators of all political stripes on election night detected, beyond activist circles, and outside the often rabid masses of her sworn enemies on the right, a kind of boredom or tiredness around these public appearances. There were gaffes too, about the status of the ownership of the national oil company, YPF, and even leaks coming from within La Cámpora. Perhaps more simply, there was the feeling aptly captured by the former Socialist Spanish premier Felipe González after his electoral defeat in 1996: "They don't want to see me anymore."

The enemies, too, were different, and not of Cristina's choosing. Holdout or "vulture" funds challenged the debt restructuring and led a well-funded lobbying and media campaign against the government and Argentina more generally. The media plurality law enraged opponents in the major news corporations, particularly the Grupo Clarín; a media conglomerate that had been openly hostile to Kirchnerism at least since 2008, when the government raised taxation in the agricultural sector. This uneasy stand-off with agro-exporters, which had already lost her a vice-President, the former Radical Julio Cobos, led to constant pressure on currency values, as the soy, beef and wheat lobby pushed for a devaluation and for reductions in windfall taxes.

This came on top of the loss of Kirchnerismo's most important ideological and (perhaps more significantly) financial ally, Hugo Chávez. With the latter's death and falling oil prices there came an end to the largesse that had partially helped solve the debt crisis. The downturn in the Chinese economy, a major trading partner, further meant that Cristina could no longer count on the bright macro-economic backcloth of the early years of *Kirchnerismo*. Her victories – the dismissal of the Nisman case, support from the UN against the holdouts – too often felt pyrrhic.

Kirchnerism was also a victim of its own success. The Argentina that Kirchner inherited in 2003 had stared into the abyss. The late 00s and early 2010s felt like a return to something approaching normality. For many, these were years of a commodity-led consumerist boom. Construction, car production, and energy-extraction, amongst other areas, all made great and profitable strides. But structurally Argentina still remained too reliant on agro exporting for foreign currency. Consumer booms do not have a natural brake. Unfortunately, commodity booms generally do.

If the first Peronism was effectively an agreement at national level to a certain degree of redistribution, enabling improvements in living conditions for workers without major threat to capital's profits, it seems harder in today's world to ask for restraint from either the rising middle classes or the owners of capital. Macri, with his aspirational and apolitical messages, and his own personal fortune, appealed to middle sectors, in particular in those areas of the country – the city of Buenos Aires, Córdoba – without a strong loyalty to Peronism, forgetful of the disaster of the early 2000s and eager for more prosperity. To capital, he was very obviously one of their own.

Macri's campaign hit upon a very simple communicative formula: positive, attractive messages, and the avoidance of any significant content. Watching his rallies and the eventual victory celebrations was like witnessing an eight-year old's party with too large a budget: broad smiles, loud music, flashing lights, bright balloons – lots of balloons – and "dad dancing." But compared to Scioli, Macri appeared good-looking, energetic, and slick. Effectively, he was offering people the promise of one big birthday celebration. Looking at the respective bunkers on election night, beyond the obvious contrast in mood, one was also struck by the differences in race and class: Macri's boosters were almost entirely white, well-dressed, as well as grinning. The groups who gathered at first in hope and soon in commiseration for Scioli, showed more working class and racially disparate tendencies.

Some remarkable things happened in these elections. Buenos Aires – both city and province – is now out of Peronist hands. Córdoba voted more than 70% for Macri, notable given that student and labour activism in the city almost brought down a military government in the 1960s. In provinces like Santa Fe, many self-proclaimed socialists and Peronists voted for Macri. A long list of figures from the cultural and artistic world publicly pledged their support to Cambiemos. Macri lauded many of the achievements of *Kirchnerismo*, and even of Perón himself, during the campaign. It was as if, perhaps briefly, Peronism itself had become discursively unquestionable across the political spectrum, rather than vigorously proscribed, the approach of many of Macri's predecessors. The electoral map of Argentina is now a vivid pattern: the poor north and the resource-rich south voted largely for the FpV. The middle bit voted for Macri. Given their respective blue and yellow colours, it looks not unlike a Boca Juniors shirt.

Macri has begun with a frenzy of decree issuing, many via emergency legislation. He has made two Supreme Court appointments with strong ties to his allies, running against his declaration that he would not name *Macrista* judges. He has moved to repeal the media plurality law, obviously favouring his backers in the press and TV, and with police being sent to the government agency responsible for its application. He has abolished or significantly reduced taxes on agro exports. He has removed controls on imports. Perhaps most controversially, in this flurry of making up for lost

time, he has devalued the peso by freeing the restrictions on the currency market. The incoming Economy minister, Alfonso Pratt-Gay, has called this measure, in a phrase worthy of one of Žižek's toilet jokes, a "dirty flotation." The poet Ezequiel Zaidenwerg posted on his Facebook page that it had taken him years to realize that Chespirito was named after Shakespeare, but only a few days – but still too late – to realize that Cambiemos was an invitation to buy greenbacks. The irony of this is that "blue" (i.e. black market) dollars had been widely available at AR$15, the new official rate. But this underhand, yet essentially permitted trade didn't bring with it price inflation and salary depreciation.

On top of this, the New Year sees the start of the withdrawal of subsidies for utilities, a process ministers have christened a "sincerization." Bills, it is announced, will now be monthly not yearly, to alleviate the potentially huge hike. But this assumes that Argentines are incapable of multiplying by twelve. Russell Brand, of all people, once wrote that politicians never say that they are going to do things like slashing welfare or cutting wages because, if they did, no one would ever vote for them.

There are other worrying developments too, even in these early days. Two left-wing papers, *Página/12* and *Diario Registrado*, had their websites shut down by DoS attacks in the days around the presidential handover (although there is no suggestion that anyone from the new government is directly involved). Municipal police closed a cultural centre in Buenos Aires run by Kirchnerista activists, and there are convincing reports of serious violence on the part of the forces of law and order. Rubber bullets and truncheons were used against transport workers protesting layoffs by blocking the road to Ezeiza airport. A demonstration of public sector workers in La Plata protesting the dismissal of 4,500 employees was also given the same treatment.

It won't be an easy ride for Macri. Tens of thousands turned out to wish Cristina well, rather more than showed up for Macri's first rally as Head of State. There is a lot of grass-roots activism that didn't exist, or at least wasn't as well organised as it has become, ten or fifteen years ago. Nor is there complete unity or unanimity within Macri's support. The daily *Clarín*, closely allied to his campaign, immediately fired a shot across his bows, publishing a profile of Juliana Awada, the new first lady, mentioning slave labour and clandestine workshops.[i] In a bizarre sequence of events, *La Nación* ran an editorial calling for an end to trials of those accused of crimes against humanity in the 1970s, so rancid and vitriolic that the paper's own journalists organised a protest and repudiation.

Much in line with the vernacular popular dictum that "It's better the devil you don't know," the Argentine people have voted for a change. Whether they will come to regret it or not it is too early to say. Sadly, the history of fundamentalist liberalism in Argentina paints a dark picture for the years ahead.

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[i] See http://www.clarin.com/zona/Juliana-Awada-Primera-Dama-sonreir_0_1472253214.html