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Argentina

A new stage for the left

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On Sunday, October 27, 2013 midterm elections were held in Argentina and their results may have important consequences for the country and the region. Franck Gaudichaud interviewed Claudio Katz and Eduardo Lucita, members of the EDI (Economists of the Left) collective.

How do you evaluate the outcome of the recent elections?

CK: It was an election of no surprises because the recent primaries anticipated the decline of "oficialismo" and the impossibility of a re-election of Cristina Kirschner. The president has run out of room to define the candidacy of the next president as Lula and Dilma did in Brazil. However with over 32% of the national vote they remain the largest minority and maintain a quorum in both houses. The most important aspect is the emergence of a strong axis of rightist succession, the Frente Renovador (FR), with 43% of the vote in the strategic province of Buenos Aires (37% of registered voters), headed by a mayor of Buenos Aires, Sergio Massa, and composed of a large team of ex Kirchneristas and sectors of the Partido Justicialista (PJ) and traditional trades unionism.

EL: In the new scenario emerging from the primaries the government has in recent months assumed much of the rightist agenda, with confrontational slogans of "choice" and "deepening the model". It has been driven by its rightist ally Daniel Scioli, adopting a tough discourse on the sensitive issue of law and order, despite silence on the state apparatus collusion with drug traffickers. Economically it also began a turn towards re-indebtedness, with payments to the CIADI and agreements with the World Bank and IMF. We'll see if this is the prelude to the adjustment the dominant class demands from the next president. These two alternatives will depend on a strategic choice. Kirchnerismo can remodel the interior of Peronism, accepting a conservative turn, or can gamble on its own construction imagining a future return of Cristina. Until now there are signals in both directions.

How do you see the landscape in relation to 2015?

CK: It is clear that in the camp of Justicialismo the contest has already begun for 2015 between Massa (FR), an upstart mayor, who has recruited key leaders in industry, banking and agriculture and Scioli, who exhibits credentials as vice president and governor. This is presented as a guarantor of an orderly transition, much appreciated by the establishment, who have not forgotten the stormy administrations of Alfonsín, Menem and De la Rúa.

EL: You also have to see how the right of Macri (Union-PRO) will intervene in all this, after the consolidation achieved in the Federal Capital (39% and almost 8% nationally), to make alliances which can tilt the balance in favor of one or another variant of the PJ. We can't rule out a priori the potential role of the candidates of pan-radicalismo, a sort of centre-right republicanism, like Binner (a socialist who scored 42% in the province of Santa Fe) and Cobos (a radical who won 48% in the Province of Mendoza)). If Peronism is finally divided a runoff is likely. Sunday's election ratified this convulsive scenario, with the novel ingredient of a breakthrough for the anti-capitalist left.

I am especially interested in this point: what was the extent of that breakthrough and to what is it due?

EL: With the figures we know so far, the polls having closed about ten hours ago, the combined left has around 1,400,000 votes. This was largely accounted for by the Frente de Izquierda y los Trabajadores (FIT) who won 1,250,000 votes. It should be remembered that previously various forces did not contest the primaries. This big jump was first anticipated by the FIT winning nearly a million votes in the primaries and immediately afterwards by certain

provincial elections, like Salta-Capital where they got 20%. In the meantime there were the UBA university elections, where the FIT won in the majority of student centers. The sum of votes exceeds that achieved in important elections in the past by the Frente del Pueblo (FREPU) and Izquierda Unida (IU) -alliances of the MAS and the CP- or Autodeterminación y Libertad (Luis Zamora). The result is that the FIT won three national deputies, and a deputy and representatives in seven provincial legislatures, but it is too early to have a definitive framework. Additionally, in the southern province of Tierra del Fuego, an enclave of the electronics and household electrics industry, a metalworker leader with an activist past in the class-based left presented himself as a candidate of the workers and won 22% of the votes and election to the national council.

CK: This has been the highest vote for the left since the pre-Peronism period. The importance of the result and the subsequent creation of a new stage with the left is obvious. The novelty lies in the electoral arena and not in the existence of the militant left; it has maintained a significant presence at the student union level during the time of political predominance of Kirchnerismo.

I interpret this important left vote as a mandate to fight. It received this flow of support against popular intuition of an upcoming adjustment and expectation of a defense of the conquests in the street. An important sector of the population does not want the Kirchnerista experience to end in a swing to the right. There is a change in the levels of consciousness that can particularly be seen in the interior. For decades the only possibility for the left was to elect a deputy from the capital or Buenos Aires province (regions of greater politicization), now this has been extended to the interior (usually more conservative), where the links between the government and provincial oligarchies have been very close. There Kirchnerismo is not the expression of the more liberal sectors (such as the intellectuals of Carta Abierta or the official TV program 6, 7, 8), but the conservative governors and orthodox justicialismo.

EL: We must consider another determinant of the advance of the left, which is the erosion of the anti-Kirschner centre left which was diluted in pan-radicalismo, or the weakness of the more genuine progressivism that sought to occupy the space abandoned by the anti-Kirschner centre left, not presenting more radical objectives. Those who wanted to punish the government from a progressive perspective had only the option of the anti-capitalist left.

But the left has been present many times at elections and has never managed these results ...

CK: Certainly. This time the FIT campaign focused on specific demands (wage tax elimination, denunciation of Chevron, a wage equal to the family shopping basket, 82% sliding rate for retirees and so on), which contrasted with the vague message of the traditional parties, who appealed to happiness, smiles and the family, as if selling toothpaste. The left changed its old interventions in the elections. They weren't axised around the workers' government or questioning of the bosses' candidates. They understood that in a television studio you cannot talk like you are at a rally and that the social democratic involution does not transit through the use of the tie. They even appealed to the useful vote, highlighting the need to have deputies in Congress with the rest of the benches. This maturing would have been disparaged in another era as an expression of "democratizing parliamentarism".

EL: You have to remember also that the construction of electoral figures is a long process with little renovation and large oscillations. This persistence has rewarded Altamira (FIT) and Zamora (AyL), whose public profile was further enhanced by big events like the days of 2001 or the murder of the young activist Mariano Ferreyra. The mainstream media also played a key role, not attacking the left since its first goal was to weaken its immediate opponent, Kirchnerismo. They worked in favor of the right-wing but without attacking options on the left. In a context of low social mobilization they suspended circumstantially the typical derogatory or frightening message, which will resume in full when pickets and demonstrations resurface.

Anyway, in my personal opinion, I think there is a lacuna in the discourse of the left and it is an absence of an anti-systemic critique. Our participation in the institutional framework is not just a problem of raising demands

expressed by workers and popular sectors, but also to use those instances to educate, to explain that the main obstacle to eradicating the evils that capitalism produces is the capitalist system.

Does this advance of the left break the traditional political dominance of Peronism?

CK: It's almost 6% nationally, with very good results in working class and popular areas (e.g. in the southern oil region of the country the left received 15% of votes). I think for the moment this dominance is eroding. The left is reemerging in a context of Peronist crisis, repeating a constant in the history of Argentina. It has reopened an opportunity that can be consolidated or diluted. The left has disappointed several times in the past and could not hold as an alternative. The classism of the 1970s was offset by the return of Peron, repeated at the end of the dictatorship and was overshadowed by the avalanche of Alfonsín once again in the late '80s, and IU and FREPU diluted into divisions which erupted with force after 2001 and could not collectively build.

EL: I would add to this that there is now emerging a new generation looking for a channel of political rupture, not just a trade union break with Peronism. The first significant electoral intervention of the independent left has been very promising, and has led to an interesting and useful debate in sectors which are beginning to overcome the paralyzing autonomist tradition of anti-electoralism.

But you have published more than one document where you have been very critical of the FIT. Do you maintain that position?

CK: Yes, especially at three levels. The mischaracterization of Kirchnerismo as a kind of continuity of Menemismo (and therefore neutrality in the conflicts where it confronted the right); the reduction of the left to an orthodox Trotskyist front and the disparaging of the radical processes in Latin America. But these differences do not prevent us from recognizing the new political reality that is emerging around the left party. This change forces us to lay down old hatreds and prejudices and requires us to seek new lines of confluence. We think that the FIT should open beyond the organizations that currently make it up and the rest of the left should converge with that opening, through a process of mutual understanding and learning.

EL: There is already much evidence that in a growing process of politicization, as is happening in our country in recent years, we must clearly assume an explicit alliance with the organic left, even with the differences that undoubtedly exist. In our case with the flags of Latin Americanism, non-sectarian and proposing from this alignment a terrain of common action with consistent progressivism.

CK: I think it is essential to work from now on preparing a common candidacy for 2015. Many of the left voters are beginning to think: how would a government of this type be? What if you win the presidency? The answer to that expectation is a strategic link between electoral access to government and the battle for power, from a program that we develop collectively.

Certainly generalizations are insufficient. We must define our way to solve the country's problems, with specific measures in the delicate problems of debt, taxes, price controls, nationalization, oil, and the management of exchange controls.

EL: The EDI is preparing a workshop-debate on the economic situation that we hope to develop with all the left, to clarify the diagnosis and alternatives involved.

Finally: How could this election result affect relations with Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador?

A new stage for the left

CK - As it has been a midterm election that does not modify the presidency, immediately it should not result in significant changes in foreign policy. But we should note the strongly anti-Chavez tone that the media and the rightwing opposition deployed during the election campaign to secure a future agenda realignment with the United States. Leaders of the right and centre-right like Macri, Carrio and Binner openly support Capriles and Scioli leans toward the same direction. Criticism of Venezuela is the form of pressure that the establishment has chosen to impose a neoliberal economic turn.