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Argentina

Partying to Survive:

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Perhaps the most curious phenomenon of the recent legislative elections in Argentina is that the main political actors on the national scene have all come out to celebrate the results. Post-election reactions seem to show a national scene with many winners and no losers. Beyond the strangeness of a country as politically intense as ours, there are some elements of truth in the deliberate cuts of reality that each force proposes.

However, this unanimous celebration can still be a little violent in a country where inflation reaches 52% year-on-year, and the post-pandemic everyday life of most people is decidedly complicated. But as these elections are probably the closest we will ever get to a capitalism where everyone wins, the opportunity to analyse them should not be missed.

A comeback favoured by few

The Frente de Todos (FdT) celebrated having achieved figures that, objectively, are the worst obtained by unified Peronism in a national election. Thinking only of the legislative elections: the 32% obtained is less than the vote that up until now had been the worst result in Peronist electoral history of 36% in 1997, in elections which swept the Alliance [Alianza para el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educación /Alliance for Work, Justice and Education 1997-2001 of the UCR /Radical Civic Union of Raúl Alfonsín formed to oppose the Justicialist Party of Carlos Menem] into power and marked the decline of Menemism. Even in the legislative elections of 2001, months before the outbreak of the "They All Must Go" protests, Peronism exceeded 38%.

The only possible comparison would be with the 28% obtained by the Frente para la Victoria [Front for Victory] in 2009 or the 32% in 2013, but by this stage we are talking about atomised Peronism. Today, united Peronism despite having trade unions and a good part of the social movements behind it, barely equalled that mark of a moment of crisis and division. But, as in the meme, the heterogeneous government front celebrates, gestures to the sky, bites the medal, kisses the girl and shakes the champagne.

At the event in the Chacarita bunker, President Alberto Fernández confirmed the call for today's march, Wednesday 17, the day of Peronist militancy, to "celebrate the victory accordingly." Elected deputy, Victoria Tolosa Paz [of the Frente de Todos] said in radio statements: "They won by losing and we lost by winning." Beyond the fact that she probably meant it exactly the other way around (Peronism won by losing and the opposition lost by winning), the phrase is not just an expression of a low-flying dialectic, but of something very real.

With an official defeat of more than 10 points, a difference of 5 in the province of Buenos Aires and triumphs in just seven provinces, the catastrophic results of the Primary elections could foreshadow a catastrophe in last Sunday's vote that that would have opened a scenario of almost terminal crisis for the Government. But the combination of a unified exit from the campaign (after the terrible handling of the internal crisis in the days after the primaries, where for 48 hours the Frente de Todos seemed to be on the verge of exploding), the mobilisation of the indisputably powerful Justicialist Party apparatus, some very modest measures aimed at salary readjustment (the "plan platita" or putting money in people's pockets, which was not as spectacular as the opposition decried) and probably healthy popular horror at the strengthening of the exchange rate in recent weeks managed to avert that debacle. It also meant a "dignified defeat" in the Province of Buenos Aires (slightly more than one point) narrowing the national gap to 8 points and even turning the results around in Chaco and Tierra del Fuego by tight margins.

The Frustrated Longings of Macrismo

Juntos por el Cambio (JxC) [Together for Change] effectively, lost winning. It lost, as is often the case, because its expectations went way beyond reality. They fantasised that their results would surpass even those of the PASO and that it would open a "transitional" scenario (as Mauricio Macri himself said), in which, summoned by a lifeless government, they would co-manage the two years until the presidential elections. They were also prepared for an even more ruined Alberto being unable to fulfill his mandate, speculating on putting someone of his choosing in the line of succession (for example, María Eugenia Vidal's proposal to challenge the ruling party for the ownership of the Chamber of Deputies). None of that happened and then there was the triumph in 13 provinces; having managed to deny Peronism its own quorum in the Senate for the first time since the return of democracy looks like a consolation prize. Just look at the faces in the photos taken in Macri's bunker.

Moreover, they seem to be somewhat disconcerted by the pro-government commotion and are made to go leave to ask the government to "acknowledge defeat." They expected so much more. In the last two months they believed that they could better capitalise on the pandemic crisis, which would act as the magic pass that would completely erase the horror of their national administration from all memories, giving them a second chance to return to power in just two years. As this fantastic scenario is not confirmed, the internal opposition front, paused during the campaign, now also reopens among the hawks, pigeons and radicals. For them also, the years leading up to the 2023 Presidential election will be full of disputes.

In any case, despite all the distorting effects of the epidemiological crisis, 42% of the vote for JxC is easily comparable to the 41% of 2019 (although of course, it is problematic to compare legislative and presidential ones) and it would seem to show the existence of a ceiling there as well. Far from the indignant hypothesis of progressivism, which was railed against the "forgetful" citizenry who, in order to protest against the undeniable economic difficulties of the present, choose to vote for the main enforcers of structural adjustment in our history, the reality seems to be very different.

We have a situation of poverty with unemployment at 2001 levels. Inflation is above 50% and the dollar is parallel to 200 pesos. The ruling party seems unable to control the price of food and other essential items, which have all skyrocketed. Downward parity is the rule in almost all unions. Retirement funds and pensions manage to reach only a tenth of price increases thanks to periodic bonuses. There is an infinite succession of events where, almost weekly, the FdT government shoots itself in the foot. In this context a massive desertion from the ruling party and an avalanche of support for JxC would not have been unusual. But that didn't happen either. A certain memory of the devastation wracked by Macri seems to survive. What there is no longer, without a doubt, is any enthusiasm for the Government. And this is another of the key components of the national political scene.

New Old Rights

The ultra-liberals of Avanza Libertad / La Libertad Avanza [Freedom Advances] were undoubtedly the most novel phenomenon of these elections, breaking through with almost one million votes between the Province of Buenos Aires (650,000 votes) and the capital, Buenos Aires (310,000) and scoring five national deputies. Even if this is not the case right across the country, it is still a worrying phenomenon. But here again there are nuances. The Javier Milei phenomenon [1], without subtracting anything from its serious relevance, did not meet post-PASO expectations either. Some analysts even predicted his vote would reach more than 20% for these elections, after the surprising 14% of the primaries. However, it only reached 17%, which implies a somewhat sluggish growth. In the Province of Buenos Aires, José Luis Espert [2] was able to better capitalise on events and managed to become the third force, after having lost in the PASO to the Left Front (FIT-U).

Yes, they are evil. Their destructive formulas and violent speech are a real concern. But we must not forget that there were other far-right phenomena in our democracy. Antonio Domingo Bussi became governor, Luis Patti a deputy, Aldo Rico, in addition to being a deputy, was mayor of San Miguel.

[3] Clearly things are different today and whilst they were a hindrance during the last civil-military dictatorship, they now represent the new right which have been making their way in world politics.

Election of the Left: Historic?

The Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores - Unidad (FIT-U) [Workers Left Front- Unity is an electoral alliance of the Party of Socialist Workers (PTS), Workers Party (PO), Socialist Left (IS) and the Socialist Workers Movement (MST)] celebrates what is defined in several its media platforms as an "historic election." Without failing to recognise the consolidation of a left electoral space at the national level (it was the only force besides the FdT and JxC to appear in almost all the provinces) and celebrating that as an explicitly socialist front it obtained almost 6% of the overall vote (something that happens in few countries in the world), we find ourselves obliged to qualify somewhat the comrade's apparent euphoria. They obtained four national deputies: Myriam Bregman for BA City, Nicolás del Caño and Romina del Pla for the Province of Buenos Aires and Alejandro Vilca for Jujuy, in addition to some provincial and communal legislators. And that's good, despite many of the FIT-U's legislative decisions being controversial; it is also necessary to go further with criticism of a parliamentary logic that equates seats with political triumphs.

By comparing legislative elections, we see that the total of votes achieved on Sunday is 1,270,000 (5.4%), something not very far from the 1,156,000 of 2017 (4.7%), in the middle of Macri's presidential term and barely higher than the 1,211,000 obtained in 2013 (5.3%). That is, a more or less constant number over eight years of very different political situations. In addition, in 2021, a superior performance could be expected in a scenario characterised by a very restricted electoral offer (for the first time in many years, there were no center-left options that contested the vote to the left of Peronism), with a historical crisis of the Government alliance and the horrible economic variables already mentioned. And yet the left was not able to take advantage of this scenario. Historical? Not at all.

The most interesting phenomena of the FIT-U vote without doubt, are that of Myriam Bregman, nicknamed The Russian, in Buenos Aires City, achieving 8% and managing to break through a very important ceiling for the local left, showing that her charismatic figure was able to transcend the militant world; an important 20% growth in the vote in the Province of Buenos Aires; and the election of Alejandro Vilca, a garbage collector, in Jujuy, where right until the last moment the Left Front was in a contest with the FdT for the second provincial seat, losing by just 3000 votes. Also important in this case is the fact that it is the second election with votes above two digits for the left in that province (18.4 and 25.1, respectively), which could allow us to speak of a consolidation of a red constituency and a countertrend to some very short-term provincial phenomena of the last elections. After the historic 2013 election in Mendoza, which catapulted Del Caño [Nicolás del Caño member of the Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas, PTS/Party of Socialist Workers] into national politics, the FIT collapsed there, falling 62% in these elections compared to the 125,000 votes obtained in 2017, while in Chaco it fell by 53%, in Córdoba by 39%, and so on.

Uphill all the way to 2023

Beyond quantitative analysis, these elections also raise some more fundamental questions. In the framework of the great post-neoliberal transition that we are going through on a global level with, as yet, uncertain results, it would be important in our country to think about whether these results imply the continuity of the polarising climate that has characterised national politics for more than a decade or whether they begin to make way for a deeper crisis of

representation, with an overall questioning of the political system.

For any organisation that intends to do politics in this country in the coming years, the strategies in each case are very different. The results of the PASO seem more in line with the second hypothesis, but this Sunday's rearrangement could indicate that, despite the sustained crisis scenario, the national political system still has enough strength to channel demands through institutional channels. The answer is not so clear, then, and we will have to wait for the patient's evolution.

In any case, the two years remaining until the presidential elections in 2023 will be very tough, with a clearly battered ruling front, which will have severe parliamentary difficulties due to the loss of control of the Senate - even though it managed to sustain itself as the largest minority in both Houses. Additionally, the ongoing negotiations with the International Monetary Fund will force the government to continue advancing in the ongoing adjustment plans (as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner herself healthily acknowledged in the context of brutal honesty of the post PASO crisis).

In other political crises, Kirchnerism was able to invoke a change of direction that rebuilt its popular support and gave it financial room to manoeuvre: for example the nationalisation of the AFJP private pension funds in 2008, which enabled it to show leadership and maintain political control until reaching relative economic recomposition in 2011. But today the situation is different on several levels: not only is popular support very far from the enthusiasm of those times - with apathy, fatigue and disillusionment wreaking havoc among our own ranks - but what would be truly surprising is a strong progressive dynamic of initiatives by the government of Alberto Fernández in this context, in which the priority for the ruling classes is the advancement of the triple reform (labor, pension and tax).

It is true that this year the post-pandemic rebound will ensure a GDP recovery that may reach almost 10% and that there are variables in favour of record harvests and grain prices at the international level, but there is still a long way to go before the recovery from above translates into improvements for below and, furthermore, the figures for next year are not so optimistic.

Tensions with union allies will intensify as the labor reforms advance sector by sector, as will the support of social movements, which will have to see how the official policy evolves for those who selflessly went through the epidemiological crisis (for which the appointment of Juan Zabaleta as minister of the area is not a good sign). [Juan Zabaleta, retired racing car driver, is the recently appointed Minister of Social Development]

It is not unlikely that, in addition, a relative economic recovery will add to wage pressures in different sectors, an issue that will tighten the rope in a scenario of serious exchange rate shocks, inflation, a fall in real wages and very limited growth for 2022. After the pyrrhic defeat on Sunday, the ruling party is already paraphrasing itself, waving the slogan of "there is 2023" and discussing whether the FdT has to go to the PASO to determine its presidential candidate or not. This speculation is somewhat counter-current in the context of the deep social and economic crisis that the country is going through and the remote prospects that the dull Albertist epic could ever regain some kind of popular enthusiasm.

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Translated and annotated by David Fagan from [Jacobin America Latina](#).

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[1] Javier Gerardo Milei is an Argentine libertarian economist, politician, author, radio conductor, preacher, public speaker and recently elected federal deputy. In the September 2021 primary elections, the PASO or Primarias Abiertas Simultáneas y Obligatorias/ Simultaneous and mandatory open primaries, he came third in the city of Buenos Aires with 13.66% of the vote as part of the Avanza Libertad slate.

[2] José Luis Espert is a right-wing economist and politician and member of Avanza Libertad

[3] Antonio Domingo Bussi, Army General under the dictatorship, was Governor of Tucumán from 1995-1999. Luis Patti is a politician and a former senior police officer, convicted of involvement in torture and murder during the 1970s. He was a leader of the conservative Federalist Union Party. In 2005 he ran for and won a seat in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies however, he was prevented from taking his seat due to outrage over various crimes he committed during the dictatorship. Aldo Ricco is a retired Lieutenant Colonel and politician, involved in the Semana Santa"/ Easter week of 1987 and the "Monte Caseros" mutiny 1988 where sectors of the Armed Forces, known as carapintadas ("painted faces", due to their facial camouflage), revolted against President Raúl Alfonsín. He later formed MODIN Movimiento por la Dignidad y la Independencia/ Movement for Dignity and Independence and contested several elections being elected mayor of San Miguel (1997-2003) and was Minister of Police of Buenos Aires province for a short period in 1999.