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Argentina:

The elections and the left

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The Argentine legislative elections in August and October 2017 will be of huge importance for the entire Latin American region, with the government of Mauricio Macri establishing itself as a bastion of the neoliberal right after 12 years of Kirchnerist government (2003-2015). The coming elections represent a central challenge for the three forces which with varying degrees of importance structure the country's political landscape: the right and the forces around Macri, Peronism and the forces around Kirchnerism, and the Trotskyist and anti-capitalist movements. In this context, Frank Gaudichaud spoke to two well known Argentine left activists, Claudio Katz and Eduardo Lucita.

How important are the coming elections in August and October?

Claudio Katz : These are elections at two levels. Up until now, the primaries have served as a filter between the forces competing for the "useful vote". Many analysts agree that the elections in the province of Buenos Aires will decide the political trend for the coming years; notably for the presidential elections of 2019. If Macri loses, his project of re-election will be strongly compromised.

Eduardo Lucita : The economic context is very different from that when Macri and his party, "Propuesta Republicana" (PRO), came to power. All the indications are negative. Consumption has fallen, wage rises are eroded by persistent inflation, particularly for food, unemployment and poverty are increasing. Meanwhile, the country has started to indebt itself again at a significant rhythm, this being symbolized by the recent issue of a 100 year bond. The coming elections are those of "parliamentary renewal", and everyone agrees that whatever the result, the relationship of forces in parliament will not change. There will still be a minority government which has to negotiate with the other forces. The importance of these elections rests solely on a projection for the presidential elections in 2019.

CK : We are talking about an adjustment without any possibility of changing the givens. I think the government will be tempted by changes in electoral laws and administrative manoeuvres to conceal this disaster.

What type of manoeuvres?

CK : First, by the communication which will reinforce the line "against (Peronist) populism" and thus strengthen the social and political base of the right which was forged during the demonstrations and "cacerolazos" under Kirchner. This sector is very reactionary and based on a true "class hatred" inherited from the old "gorilismo". [1] They denounce Venezuela et Cuba, insult the teachers, demand repression of the *piqueteros* and the banning of strikes, thus taking up the conservative discourse which dominates the television. This support explains how the government has maintained itself despite the economic sluggishness.

EL : From my viewpoint, what this is about is as much – indeed more – the cultural battle and the advance from years of neoliberal positions as the economic aspect.

Is this rightist current solidly anchored in Argentine society?

CK : It's both significant and limited. This is shown by the show of force during the big demonstration of March 24th this year [2], with a special role for women, and the impressive reaction to the attempt to introduce the "2 for 1" law

which facilitated the liberation of the criminals of the dictatorship.

EL : The government is also supported by the collaboration of the trade union bureaucrats. While there are new mobilizations every day, we have seen a significant downturn in relation to those of March. The CGT leaders repeat the same schema as that of the “gordos” under Menem. [3] If they do not participate in the privatization frauds, they want to maintain the subsidies which go to unions who sign collective agreements so they don’t mobilize. They are particularly concerned by the criticisms heard in the streets on these capitulations, especially since the last big mobilization initiated by the CGT, which attracted several hundred thousand workers, some of whom invaded the platform which the bureaucrats had to shamefully abandon.

In these conditions, what is the influence of the former president, Cristina Kirchner?

EL : There is currently a real reconstitution of her leadership which disturbs the establishment. The dominant classes thought she was totally out of the game and that other more reliable sectors would come to represent Peronist continuity.

CK : Her reappearance poses problems to the élites who have thus lost the certainty of a long term “conservative restoration”. If Cristina Kirchner wins the province of Buenos Aires, the dominant class will begin to seek a replacement for Macri. Also, while awaiting these electoral results the bankers continue to be concerned about the Argentine debt. We can see similarities with the Brazilian situation. Not in the comparison with Temer, but in the establishment’s fears of seeing a return to the previous government. There, they do not know whether to definitively ban, assimilate or confront Lula and here the same doubts are expressed in relation to Cristina.

Nonetheless, whatever the political hypotheses, it seems that there will be a deepening of neoliberal austerity?

EL : There is no doubt there. The current government is raising the stakes to ensure the support of the big capitalists. Harsh measures have thus been announced in the midst of the electoral campaign. They are introducing steep price increases (*tarifazos*), reducing pensions for the disabled, tolerating layoffs and openly favouring labour flexibility. They intend to reduce the tax deficit by lowering public expenditure still further after October 2017. We should remember that 56% of public expenditure is social and another 17% goes to the wages of public employees and family allowances. The projects for tax and labour reform leave no doubt on the orientation followed. The more lucid neoliberal sectors argue that all this can only be done in a political consensus bringing together the opposition sectors and the government. It isn’t by chance that a few days ago Ramón Tamames, one of the ideologues of the Moncloa pact was here. [4]

CK : I think that they will also accentuate the repressive turn as during the mobilizations of 2001. They want to polarize the electoral field and want to anchor the idea that an electoral defeat for the PRO would be the beginning of political chaos and the collapse of the economy.

Among the popular classes, is Cristina still seen as a credible alternative to neoliberal aggression?

EL : Cristina ended her term in office with a good image among this layer of the population. Her reputation is intact despite her defeat. She has not ended up like Alfonsín [5], Isabel [6] or Menem but rather like Perón or Campora [7]. It is the first time in the history of Peronism that a leadership has maintained itself despite an electoral defeat.

CK : I think that with the “Citizen’s Front”, Kirchnerismo is trying to broaden its appeal and distance itself from the

Peronist apparatus. [8] That is what the candidacies indicate in any case. Meanwhile, the Citizen's Front has adopted a strategy of verbal confrontation by denouncing the price rises and declaring a food and health emergency, demanding a price freeze and above all the renegotiation of the debt. Don't forget that the Kirchnerists were in serious conflict with the élites in some areas, notably at the time of the draft tax law on agro-exports or with the media law.

EL : But Cristina forgets that many deputies were elected to congress on her lists and then voted for all Macri's laws. In the province of Santa Cruz the Kirchnerists govern with the same methods they denounce at the national level.

Where is the left in this new context?

CK : Cristina's reappearance has generated two types of reaction. Some think that she alone has the ability to beat Macri. Others see in her a posture compatible with the current government. It seems to me both are wrong.

EL : I totally agree. The first group forget that dissolution into Kirchnerism would mean abandoning a good deal of any "progressive" movement. This option accepts the vertical functioning of Kirchner, the repression of Berni, the designation of Milani or the payment to Repsol, the World Bank or the Club of Paris. [9] The second group makes the opposite error. They do not analyse the twists and turns of Kirchnerismo and the real conflicts between this political current and the government.

CK : Right now, Cristina's message is one of protest and national indignation. She doesn't practice the aesthetic marketing of the PRO or the depoliticizing message of the Republicans. You have to see the gap that exists between here and Macri and also understand that this differentiation is not a simple artificial media construction, all this in a social context very different from that of 2015.

You both voted for the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores (FIT) in previous elections. [10] Will you continue to do so?

EL : The FIT has continued a left tradition which is very present in Argentine politics, and has a national audience, contesting 22 provinces out of 24 and 100 districts in the province of Buenos Aires. It's a first. Whether it's in the meetings, the media or the street, these activists affirm an explicit anti-capitalist profile. They thus render audible a socialist discourse which politicizes at a mass scale.

CK : I would add that they numerically strengthen the activist sectors by a great investment in struggles. It is an organizational outlet for the combative sectors of trades unionism. But the main argument which justifies the vote for them is very simple: their elected representatives are in the front line in the social struggles and against austerity. With the Kirchnerists it's the opposite, desertion, particularly in recent years. Despite all these elements and this recognition, I have numerous objections in relation to the FIT.

Such as?

CK : Over the years, they have created a real "glass ceiling" which prevents any qualitative leap forward for the left. They have refused to integrate like-minded forces like the MST (Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores) and the Nuevo Mas who have resolved to found another front targeting the same electoral base. There are no political, still less ideological arguments for this refusal. These are three Trotskyist parties who reject other parties of the same affiliation. The only explanation is an apparatus calculation. They hope that this front will not go beyond the primaries and will finally call for a vote for them. The same logic governs the internal life of the FIT. There is no deep

discussion, the FIT is closed to other left traditions and does not want internal elections to overcome them.

EL : This sectarianism, which I stress exists not only in the FIT but also in the other forces of the left, has two origins. First, a logic of self-construction, what Gramsci calls “party patriotism” which always ends up in controversies and struggles of apparatuses. Second, this type of organization has a “class against class” approach which de facto limits alliances and leads also to a confusion of electoral fronts and strategic alliances. It seems to me that these conceptions are at the origin of their incomprehension of the complexity of the Latin American processes.

I gather that you do not approve of the FIT’s positions on the Venezuelan situation?

CK : That is another point of disagreement although we have abstained from commenting on this situation. None of the three member parties of the FIT clearly denounce the right wing coup d’état supported by US imperialism in Venezuela. A little like the dominant media who are content to describe chaos without designating those culpable. Also they point to the responsibilities of the government and the opposition as if the CIA and Maduro were the same thing.

EL : I find that the most serious aspect is that one of the three forces of the FIT has directly campaigned, here in Argentina, for Maduro’s resignation. Nobody should be exempt from criticism, but it is necessary not to stray into the camp of reaction and imperialism. They are doing again what they have already done during the conflict between Kirchner and the big proprietors.

So there are opportunities for the left but the road remains complex?

CK : That’s right. The possibilities arise from the huge capacity of résistance of the popular classes, the accumulation of experience and the activist strength that exists in the country. The difficulties come from the difficulty in correctly interpreting the changes to come, while going beyond sectarianism. It’s a common challenge and nobody should prejudge the result at this stage.

EL : The situation is complex and contradictory but represents a real opportunity for the anti-capitalist forces. There is now a new possibility to show that the obstacles to surmount in order to resolve the problems caused by capitalism in our society, which no fraction of the bourgeoisie in government has resolved, are found in capitalism itself. And I agree with Claudio when he says that between now and 2019, everybody must conquer sectarianism. For these elections, the FIT has found an agreement with a Guevarist “popular power” current which will have candidates on its lists. It’s an advance, a small one but still an advance. I remain hopeful that sooner or later social pressure will force the FIT, or any other left front, to become a movement which will allow the convergence of all the experiences of the anti-capitalist left.

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[1] “Gorilismo” refers to the military putschists in Argentina and the virulently anti-authoritarian/conservative currents.

[2] 41 years after the dictatorship took power on this date - and at the same time to protest Macri [i](#)

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[3] The “gordos” are the union bureaucrats who supported privatization and anti-worker measures under Menem (1989-1999).

[4] The inter-party pact which ensured the “democratic transition” in the Spanish state in 1977.

[5] President 1983-89 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C3...>

[6] Allende, daughter of Salvador Allende, president of the Senate since 2014

[7] President in 1973<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%c3%...>

[8] The reference is to Kirchner’s strategy to win elements of the centre left to her Peronist current. For these elections, the front will take the name of Unidad Ciudadana (UC).

[9] Sergio Berni was secretary for security under the Kirchner government, and was notably responsible for the repression of the Lear workers. César Milani was head of the armed forces under Kirchner, and was involved with executions and killings under the dictatorship. Repsol, a Spanish company exploiting Argentine oil and gas, was the main target of the nationalizations decided under Kirchner. A 5 billion dollar compensation agreement was reached.

[10] The FIT is a grouping of Trotskyist parties: the PO (Partido Obrero), PTS (Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas) and IS (Izquierda Socialista). It gained 5.32% of the vote at the 2013 elections.