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Argentina after the Crash: Pride and Disillusion

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On December 10, 2003, Argentine democracy celebrated its twentieth anniversary. On that day two decades ago, Raúl Alfonsín was sworn in as the country's first democratically elected president, inaugurating what has become the longest period of democratic stability in Argentine history. The transition to democracy was received with high hopes by a population still shocked by the country's defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands War and by the disclosures of atrocities committed by the military dictatorship that ruled between 1976 and 1983. Unfortunately, the celebration of two uninterrupted decades of democratic rule, in a country that had been a poster child for political instability and authoritarianism, has been overshadowed by a host of recent woes. These include record levels of unemployment and poverty, generalized social protest, increasing frustration with political elites, growing crime rates, and a severe contraction in Argentina's gross domestic product.

This gloomy landscape is the fallout of economic and political turmoil that began a little more than two years ago. In December 2001, angry pot-banging citizens took to the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities to demand the resignation of all elected officials. The civic mobilizations forced the resignation of President Fernando De la Rúa and opened a short period of political uncertainty in which five different presidents governed in less than two weeks. The aftereffects of this dramatic crisis of representation had not yet dissipated when the economic breakdown and wrenching depression of 2002 followed. Argentina made the international headlines again after formally defaulting on its foreign debt of more than

\$140 billion. A 75 percent devaluation of the peso followed the default.

The economic and social costs were startling: GDP contracted to 1993 levels, the unemployment rate rose to a record 22 percent, and the poverty rate soared. In the eyes of Argentines and most foreign observers, the country had reached a political and economic bottom.

Yet, even in the midst of these dismal circumstances, no one thought that the anniversary celebration might turn sour. Argentine democracy appears to be weathering its most serious challenge since 1983 with relative success. The state's ability to withstand the stress of such a dramatic chain of events without breaking down certainly deserves recognition. The political and economic crisis of the past two years has altered the normal pace of politics and generated high levels of political and social turmoil. But it has not led to the collapse of democratic institutions or prompted calls for authoritarianism.

Democratic institutions have proved resilient even under very challenging circumstances. While the resignation of De la Rúa resulted in the flurry of short-lived presidential administrations, a transitional government was eventually appointed that managed to carry out its mandate to prepare for new presidential elections. These were held in April 2003 and a new administration headed by former Peronist governor Néstor Kirchner assumed power on May 25, closing the period of political and institutional upheaval that began in December 2001.

Civilian support for democracy remains high despite growing dissatisfaction with the government's performance. A recent poll shows that Argentines still retain a strong identification with the democratic regime. Almost 60 percent of the respondents claim to identify with the values of democracy even when half of those interviewed

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were disappointed with the performance of the democratic administrations that have ruled the country since 1983. When asked about the feelings that the democratic anniversary generated, pride came first (28 percent) followed by disillusionment (19 percent).

The popular demonstrations that two years ago rocked the Argentine system have dissipated, but the problems that ignited the crisis of representation are far from gone. The regeneration of trust in political elites and representative institutions will largely depend on the political system's ability to respond to calls for greater government transparency and accountability.

To understand the political challenges facing the Kirchner administration today, we need first to understand what fed the unprecedented wave of civic anger that washed over Argentina. This was not a circumstantial or isolated event triggered by an unpopular and politically unskillful president like De la Rúa. Rather, it represented the latest episode of a conflict between citizens and politicians that dates to the initial years of the new democratic era. The past 20 years have seen a process of political learning and innovation within Argentine society that has made this democratic transition qualitatively different from previous democratic experiences. While these political innovations have made the democratic system more resilient, they also have resulted in a more critical and conflict-prone relationship between citizens and political representatives.

FROM INSTABILITY TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Between 1930—when the country faced its first military interruption of the constitutional order—and the return to democratic rule in 1983, Argentina's political scene was characterized by an inability to institutionalize a viable regime. A chaotic succession of various institutional experiments inevitably failed to consolidate, opening the way for new waves of political and institutional experimentation. The country experienced an authoritarian form of populist democracy under Juan Perón, then restricted forms of democracy aimed at proscribing the majoritarian Peronist force after the fall of Perón in 1955. The military intermittently intervened in politics through coups or the exercise of various forms of veto power over civilian authorities. Then there were periods of sustained military intervention. The regime headed by General Juan Carlos Onganía that ruled Argentina between 1966 and 1970 inaugurated the first

episode of the new era of military interventionism in politics, but it would have its most radical expression in the brutal dictatorship that governed the country between 1976 and 1983.

The common thread in this diverse catalogue of regimes was their inability to develop into legitimate institutional orders. Whether democratic, semidemocratic, or authoritarian, each regime was deemed illegitimate by a large sector of the population. Each also immediately sparked open resistance by opponents willing to resort to whatever means were available to generate a crisis and the breakdown of the regime.

In every round of this perverse political game, rights and constitutional guarantees were constantly violated and constitutional rules and electoral laws blatantly manipulated and bent to accommodate the political wishes of the authority in power. If an election would not produce the expected outcome, it would be annulled. If an administration did not yield to certain demands, it would be toppled. This systematic violation of legal and constitutional arrangements destroyed the authority of constitutionalism. Political and social life assumed the form of a Hobbesian war of all against all in which any means were valid and no boundaries constrained the behavior of social and political actors. In many political science texts, post-Peronist Argentina became a prime example of political ungovernability.

These dynamics generated a spiral of violence and political polarization that reached its zenith with the 1976 dictatorship, when a radical form of military administration took power. The military junta that ousted Perón's widow from the presidency on March 24, 1976, suspended all constitutional guarantees and proclaimed itself the country's supreme authority. The new governing junta was determined to eliminate any dissenting voice or any group that dared to challenge its authority. The junta's recipe for restoring "order" was drastic: the abduction, systematic torture, and murder of anyone who in the paranoid eyes of the authorities appeared to threaten the military government's political ambitions. The junta was apparently determined to extirpate all sources of the country's chronic ungovernability. Trade union leaders, students, professionals, blue-collar workers, artists: no one was above suspicion. The armed forces in effect openly embraced criminal behavior. Victims were kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed without any moral let alone legal consideration.

This dark period gave birth to the human rights movement in Argentina, a crucial episode in the

country's history. The movement's emergence became the "hinge" that made possible Argentina's transition from its authoritarian past to its democratic present. Why was the human rights movement so influential? Because it introduced into Argentine political culture a much-needed concern for rights and constitutionalism. Activists' brave struggle against the horrors of state terrorism taught Argentines about not only the crucial protective role that constitutional rights and legal limits play in any civilized society, but also the high costs that the country was paying because of its systematic refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of these rights and limits. The movement's discourse and politics triggered processes of political learning and cultural innovation that formed the pillars on which the current democratic structure rests. Collective learning provided a solid foundation for democracy and led to the emergence of a new, more sophisticated, and vigilant citizenry willing to defend its rights and ready to denounce breaches of law by public officials. But this concern with improving the quality and performance of institutional arrangements would encounter serious obstacles.

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

The revalorization of the rule of law by the human rights movement profoundly affected Argentines' inherited understanding of democracy. The movement's politics and discourse served to denounce and discredit military authoritarianism and also played a crucial role in reshaping the country's previous tradition of democratic populism. The human rights movement's major accomplishment was to question the authoritarian features of past populist movements in favor of a constitutional democratic model organized around a culture of rights and governmental accountability. This is an accomplishment not sufficiently acknowledged in the literature on democratization. The emergence of a new consensus around a constitutional form of democracy represented a political breakthrough. It made possible the consolidation of a competitive party system.

At the social level, the collective learning sparked by human rights activists helped prompt important sectors of the electorate to develop a more critical attitude toward political leaders. This

also led to the development of new forms of civic engagement organized around demands for rights and government accountability, one of the most noteworthy and visible features of the new democratic landscape. The emergence of a more independent electorate and of several civic initiatives aimed at denouncing wrongdoing has introduced a productive source of tension in the relationship between citizens and their political representatives. Political behaviors that in the past were socially acceptable now generate civic scorn and anger. Media scandals, mass mobilizations to denounce official involvement in illegal activities, NGO programs to increase and improve government transparency: these are now well-established features of public life in the new Argentine democracy. They offer testimony of a new civic sensibility toward proper and accountable government behavior.

The concerns about rights, constitutionalism, and due process are of course a healthy development. However, they also open up a source of tension and potential

conflict between citizens and politicians about the use of public office. Formerly tolerated or even celebrated political styles and behaviors now become the subject of critical social scrutiny. This tension between civic demands and ingrained political practices has generated a string of scandals focused on corruption or the breach of legality and due process by public officials. Throughout the 1990s, Argentina's political life was repeatedly shaken by exposés of official wrongdoing that implicated many prominent figures of President Carlos Saúl Menem's administration—including the president himself. "Swiftgate," "Yomagate," IBM/Banco Nación, the arms sale scandal: these are the names of just a few of the scandals that tainted the Menem administration's reputation. Public officials scorned press revelations, and only in a very few cases did those suspected of wrongdoing receive judicial sanction.

The presence of a more demanding citizenry unwilling to extend blank checks to its political representatives may help to explain the seemingly odd mix of responses by Argentines to 20 years of democracy. Despite their considerable discontent with the performance of most of the administrations that have governed the country since 1983, Argentines place great value and pride in their democratic institutions. The latest *Latinobarómetro*

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poll shows that Argentine support for democracy still remains one of the highest in the region (only surpassed by Costa Rica and Uruguay, two countries with long-established democratic traditions). This support has strengthened over time even as criticism of the performance of the democratic administrations has increased.

The investment Argentines now have in their democratic institutions has opened the door for a socially driven politics aimed at improving the quality of democratic institutional arrangements and at preventing their capture and privatization by unscrupulous public officials. This kind of civic politics requires a difficult equilibrium between a healthy threshold of social distrust toward political leaders and a supportive attitude toward the democratic regime. Such a delicate balancing act can sometimes be difficult to maintain, particularly when citizens believe that an unresponsive political class is systematically disregarding their claims for institutional improvement. In December 2001, the buildup of frustration and anger with an autistic political system gave way to an unexpected eruption of civic protest.

THE DECEMBER EXPLOSION

During President Menem's term in office, the proliferation of charges of government abuse and wrongdoing and the administration's disregard for such claims fed civic anger toward representative institutions. The formation of an electoral coalition by the Front for a Country in Solidarity (FREPASO) and the Unión Civica Radical, organized around a call for greater transparency and accountability, unleashed great hope among large parts of the electorate. The alliance represented a chance to refurbish the bond between disaffected citizens and the political system, a relationship that had been seriously eroded by corruption scandals. Unfortunately, the expectations that the alliance created through the electoral triumph of its presidential candidate, Fernando De La Rúa, proved short-lived. A major scandal (involving the government's payment of bribes to opposition senators to help pass a labor reform law) in the initial months of De la Rúa's administration led to the breakdown of the coalition and extinguished popular hopes for institutional and political reform. Hope for change rapidly turned into disappointment and frustration. The October 2001 midterm legislative elections showed a dramatic increase in blank and null votes. The results of the elections gave early warning of a gap that had opened between large elements of the elec-

torate and the political class. The warning was ignored. A few weeks later, members of the Argentine political leadership were shaken by an unprecedented mobilization of citizens aimed at removing them from power.

The crisis of representation that consumed the country represents the most notable moment in the recent conflict between Argentine civil and political society. Beginning on December 19, 2001, and continuing through the next summer, thousands of angry citizens took to the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities under the slogan *Que se vayan todos* (Let's get rid of them all!). The *cacerolazos* and the popular assemblies that later organized in various neighborhoods of Buenos Aires and other major cities vividly indicate how costly the refusal to address the calls for institutional transparency have become for political society.

The most visible signs of the crisis have now receded under the leadership of President Kirchner. In November 2003, six months after his election, Kirchner's approval ratings were higher than those enjoyed by any of his predecessors. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that the crisis of representation has ended. There has been no substantial renovation of the country's political leadership and no visible signs of institutional reform.

Ironically, the fallout of a crisis fueled largely by civic discontent against a political class that was viewed as unresponsive and unaccountable has strengthened those who opposed the calls for greater government transparency. The political

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breakdown and fragmentation that have characterized the post-2001 scene have weakened the political standing of those sympathetic to demands for greater transparency and strengthened the role of traditional provincial political bosses, the governors.

The crisis did not lead to the total breakdown of the Argentine party system. While the Unión Cívica Radical has suffered a dramatic loss of its electoral base, and while other smaller parties have been unable to consolidate themselves as nationwide political players, the Peronist party, the other major political party in the country, has been able to retain its electoral and territorial bases of power. According to sociologist Juan Carlos Torre, the effect has been to turn the innovative and more independent sectors of the electorate into political orphans. However, the crisis also has contributed to the fragmentation of the Peronist party's political structure into various local strongmen (the provincial governors) who compete constantly with each other to strengthen their standing within the party. The party's control of territorial and institutional resources and the absence of a strong presidential figure since the fall of De la Rúa established the governors as the crucial power brokers of the post-2001 political structure.

In his efforts to strengthen his political standing, Kirchner has sent strong signals to the new "orphans" of Argentine politics. Since taking office, he has established a clear break between his political style and Menem's. His decisions to tackle cor-

ruption in PAMI, the country's largest social services public agency and a national symbol of political corruption; to support the impeachment of Supreme Court justices; to establish a more public and transparent process for the appointment of future court nominees; and to lift the legal obstacles that were preventing justice for cases of past human rights violations by the military have helped boost his public image and build in a very short time an impressive base of public support. Kirchner's calls for moral and institutional reform constitute a threat to the network of local bosses that provide the foundation for today's political structure. Many provinces are governed by familiar family dynasties or by hegemonic political groups that do not hesitate to use their power to remain in office.

The political signals Kirchner has sent in favor of change have yet to translate into significant institutional reform. How long the president will be able to walk the narrow line that divides the political past from the democratic aspirations of Argentine politics without taking sides still remains to be seen. But it is clear that his decision—whether to pursue and sustain a process of institutional reform or to return to the practices largely responsible for today's moral malaise—will determine if Argentina can turn an important page of its recent democratic history. If so, Argentines will be able to leave disillusionment behind and replace it with the civic pride that comes from standing up against all obstacles to the normative promise of constitutional democracy. ■