

The Persistence of Peronism

By Veronica Herrera

Despite 24 years of procedural democracy, Argentina continues to face a central challenge to its democratic development: an uncompetitive party system. Given that there are few viable electoral alternatives to the dominant Peronist party, a competitive party system seems elusive. But the Argentine sociologist Torcuato S. Di Tella finds reason to remain hopeful.

The Peronist movement redefined Argentina in 1946, forever changing the political trajectory of the country. During his CLAS talk, Di Tella, one of Argentina's leading analysts on Latin American party systems and former National Secretary of Culture, argued that only by examining the history of Peronism can we understand the current party system and its prospects for reform. Under what conditions did Peronism emerge? What explains its enduring legacy?

At the turn of the century, Argentina seemed destined to become a regional leader. Early industrialization attracted a large influx of European immigrants, and the country's population grew sevenfold from 1887 to 1930. Argentina enjoyed increasing economic prosperity by exporting grains and high end products such as beef and leather goods. The conservative elites who dominated these industries ensured their own political survival through the electoral fraud that dominated Argentine politics until 1916. It was then that their traditional rivals, the Radicals, won control of the presidency with the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen. The first of many military coups ended Yrigoyen's administration and returned the conservatives to power. This tension between military power and popular democracy was a fitting backdrop for the rise of the iconic populist, Juan Domingo Perón.

Although Perón was himself a colonel, his relationship with the military was tenuous at best. Perón was a key player in the United Officer's Group, a secret society that overthrew the Conservative administration in 1943. As minister of labor



Photo by Sarah Jaffe.

Congreso Nacional, Buenos Aires.

under the new regime, Perón became attuned to the demands of the working class. Soon Perón's concessions to labor were seen as a threat to the military, leading to his imprisonment in 1945. Shortly thereafter, mass demonstrations organized by the Argentine labor confederation forced Perón's release from prison. He won the 1946 presidential election with the support of an electoral coalition composed of both the working class and middle sectors. Mobilizing the working class produced a tension with the military and conservative factions that would plague both Peronism and the nation's politics for the remainder of the 20th century.

Despite the mobilization of the poor by Perón and

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Photo: Getty Images.

Juan Domingo Perón addresses a crowd from a balcony of Government House, 1950.

his wife, Eva, the former colonel's initial inspiration was the fascist model that seemed to be prospering in Italy. At the time, fascism had many attractions: the promise of industrialization, nationalist protection of the economy and a militarized state capable of maintaining social order. While Perón admired Mussolini, he favored the Latin American variant: Mexican populist and PRI founder Lázaro Cárdenas. Perón understood that he needed support from the masses. Ultimately, the populist component of Peronism prevailed over its fascist inclinations; Peronism was decisively a working class party that ushered in the rise of mass politics in Argentina.

During the next 40 years Argentine politics became known as the "impossible game." In 1954, the Catholic Church, incensed over Perón's legalization of divorce, allied with conservative military factions to bomb Buenos Aires in a failed coup d'état. A year later, a successful coup forced Perón from power, and the Peronist party was banned. But one central problem remained: Perón's followers made up roughly half of the voting electorate. Barred from participating in politics, the Peronist party was moved out of the electoral system and into the only remaining channel of representation: organized labor. In theory, Peronism was the same type of working class party as the PRI in Mexico or Social Democrat variants in Europe. In practice however,

the ban on Peronism radicalized the movement. In this context, Peronism became a weakly institutionalized party led by the strongest labor movement in Latin America.

In the following decades, Argentines experienced multiple military coups, punctuated by the occasional Peronist return to power. Throughout this time the old antagonism between the military and the labor movement continued to dominate the political scene. The military coups attempted to eradicate the left, and the left would occasionally fight back through the Montoneros, a leftwing Peronist guerilla group, or through civil resistance of their own. Such antagonism led to the most violent encounter between these two enemies: the Dirty War of the 1970s in which approximately 30,000 Argentines were "disappeared" by the military government. Violence and instability greatly undermined Argentine political institutions, even as civil society united against military brutality.

Peronism continues to enjoy a fundamental and enduring legacy in Argentine politics. Whether this legacy can become a stabilizing force for the nation's party system remains to be seen given the party's recent ideological incoherence and lack of party discipline. Carlos Menem, the first post-dictatorship Peronist president, began his term in 1989 with many promises to the working class. However, he soon came to represent an entirely new type of Peronist:



Photo: Associated Press.

President Néstor Kirchner and Senator Christina Fernández de Kirchner wave to supporters from a balcony of Government House, 2006.

an economic conservative who undertook sweeping market reforms and allied with the right. In 2003, the Peronist party was so divided that three ideologically diverse presidential hopefuls were allowed to run, unofficially, as Peronist candidates.

Today, the party again holds the presidency under Néstor Kirchner who represents a center-left Peronist coalition. Kirchner enjoys a popularity rating of 70 percent and will likely be reelected if he runs for office this November. The Peronist legacy endures, but is it the only game in town?

Di Tella acknowledged that the Radicals, the only potential electoral alternative, have rarely been able to mobilize a coalition that could challenge the Peronists. Although the Radical Raúl Alfonsín was elected president after the collapse of the military junta in 1983, opposition from the labor movement limited his policy options. During Alfonsín's six-year presidency, the Argentine labor confederation organized a total of 13 general strikes. Later, the Radicals formed an electoral coalition that won the 1999 elections only to be disgraced and driven from office in the disastrous economic and political crisis of 2001. The nation's economy has since begun to recover, but what are the prospects for a more competitive party system?

Di Tella admitted that the Peronists continue to dominate Argentine politics, adding that the right has

much to do if it hopes to see the presidential palace in the near future. He argued that an electoral coalition between top business leaders and labor is unsustainable and that this central class division continues to define Argentine politics. The primary unifying element for the anti-Peronist camp is the fact that they oppose the Peronists. Whether such a factor will mobilize enough support for a viable electoral coalition to win the presidency in November's election seems unlikely. Di Tella remained optimistic, however, that Argentina was headed down a path toward becoming a "serious country," capable of managing the economy and peacefully alternating power between political parties. However, one does not need to be clairvoyant to predict that the Peronists will continue to play a key role in Argentine politics for many years to come.

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