

Buenos Aires may go right in mayor race

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --
Perhaps Argentines aren't so leftist after all.

Polls suggest President Nestor Kirchner's conservative, pro-market rivals will take control of Argentina's capital city on Sunday, despite Kirchner's personal intervention in the mayoral race.

That's bad for the ruling center-left coalition, which has framed the city election as a choice between Kirchner's leftist agenda and policies promoted by Washington that it blames for Argentina's deep economic crisis five years ago.

With October's presidential elections looming, the choice of Buenos Aires' 2.5 million registered voters could be deeply influential.

"Kirchner wants to make this race about the option of the center-left versus the center-right," said political analyst Rosendo Fraga. "An important defeat in the capital four months before the presidential election could be a negative factor for Kirchner."

The ruling party's candidate, former Education Minister Daniel Filmus, rose on the coattails of the popular Kirchner, but has trailed by as many as 20 percentage points behind Mauricio Macri, the 48-year-old president of Boca Juniors, the soccer-mad nation's most popular team.

Boca won Latin America's most prestigious club championship, the Copa Libertadores, on Wednesday night. Moments later, Macri saluted his players before a television audience of millions, a public relations windfall in a city where Boca is the working class everyman's team.

"He's going to take advantage of the win, obviously. It would be a bad idea not to," said political analyst Julio Frydenberg of San Martin National University. "In Argentina there has always been a relationship between politics and soccer."

Boca's championship glow could offset efforts to paint Macri as the second coming of former President Carlos Menem, who governed Argentina from 1989 to 1999 as a free-market advocate and close U.S. ally.

Kirchner blames the privatizations, lavish borrowing and public spending of the Menem era for the 2002 crisis, when many Argentines lost two-thirds of their savings overnight due to a peso devaluation and world-record debt default.

Macri "represents the interests of the neoliberal model. That's the truth," Kirchner said recently, alluding to Macri family dealings that flourished in the Menem era, including the soccer franchise, export ventures and a lucrative private postal service contract.

"There are two different models at stake: he is proposing a city for the few and we want to spread out the wealth," Filmus said.

Kirchner has kept Argentines in suspense about whether he or his wife Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, a popular senator in her own right, will represent the ruling party in October's presidential elections. Polls suggest either would likely win.

The Kirchners have helped guide Argentina out of economic crisis, with soaring year-after-year economic growth, and remain popular despite double-digit inflation, an intermittent energy crisis and a public works scandal.

Macri, meanwhile, has focused on local issues: rising crime, traffic gridlock, crumbling schools, budget overruns and garbage collection. "Tell Kirchner ... I'm not a candidate for president," Macri said. "We aren't going to get into a debate about national political models."

But analysts say a Macri win could make Buenos Aires his launch pad for a 2011 presidential run.