

# In Argentina, the Campaign of ‘Queen Cristina’ Focuses on Global Relations

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BUENOS AIRES, Sept. 24 — With just over a month to go before voters will choose a new president of [Argentina](#), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, or “Queen Cristina,” as she is widely known here, is living up to her nickname.

Over the past two months, Mrs. Kirchner, a senator in Buenos Aires and wife of President [Néstor Kirchner](#), has been treating her attempt to become Argentina’s first elected female president more like a coronation than a campaign.

With a healthy lead of at least 25 percentage points over her closest rival, Mrs. Kirchner has all but eschewed photo-ops with actual Argentines here in favor of coverage abroad with foreign bankers, dignitaries and international investors in Europe and the United States.

In the past two months she has piled up frequent-flier miles in trips to Mexico, Spain, Austria and Germany. This week she is in New York, where her husband is scheduled to speak at the [United Nations](#).

Mrs. Kirchner’s focus on international relations has drawn criticism from opponents and others who say she is conveniently ignoring a number of serious domestic problems that threaten to carry over for her husband’s successor, no matter who wins the election.

“There is a risk she will be so captivated by international politics and foreign relations that she will avoid the mounting problems in Argentina,” said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, a research group focusing on Latin America.

Among those issues likely to plague the next president are energy shortfalls, a shrinking budget surplus and a ballooning inflation rate that several independent economists say is now over 15 percent — almost twice what official government statistics show.

The heavy foreign travel schedule is part of a calculated strategy by the Kirchners to start the second phase of a shared presidency. Elected in 2003 with only 22 percent of the vote during the depths of Argentina’s financial crisis, Mr. Kirchner focused primarily on domestic politics and allowed relations with the United States and crucial European allies to wither.

Despite the success of his administration in turning around the economy, he chose not to run again and instead make way for his wife. Rather than risk lame-duck status during his second term, analysts say, the couple decided they could essentially tag-team the presidency for at least 12 more years. Argentine presidents are limited to two consecutive four-year terms but, unlike the United States, they can seek to run again four years after exiting the Pink House, the Argentine presidential palace.

While no one has pulled it off before, the Kirchners stand a strong chance. Mr. Kirchner once had an approval rating of almost 80 percent, and opinion polls in the past few months showed that he still commanded more than 50 percent support despite a number of recent corruption scandals. The main reason is the economy, which has rebounded from the 2002 depths and grown by 8 percent in each of the last three years.

Hailing from the university town of La Plata, outside of Buenos Aires, Mrs. Kirchner, 54, is a lawyer and polished speaker known for her strong personality and a solid human rights record that dates to her time as a senator in her husband's Patagonian state of Santa Cruz.

Many Argentines, however, see her as bossy and authoritarian. Those who have had private meetings with her say she lectures more than she listens. She told the journalist Olga Wornut, author of "Queen Cristina," that she actually liked the nickname, which dates to her days in Santa Cruz.

Her fascination with traveling and international affairs, in contrast to her husband, is genuine, said José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for [Human Rights Watch](#). "She enjoys playing in the big leagues and has a big-picture approach," Mr. Vivanco said.

"Argentina under Cristina Kirchner is going to develop a very visible foreign policy," Mr. Vivanco added. "If she finds the angle, I don't think she will be shy to actively engage Argentina in difficult human rights cases like the Sudan or Burma."

Mrs. Kirchner traveled to Venezuela this year and was instrumental in diluting the tension between the Jewish community there and President [Hugo Chávez](#), who has made many Jews nervous because of his close relationship with Iran's president, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), Mr. Vivanco said.

She is also comfortable on the dais. In recent weeks she has spoken at a number of business forums, seeking to convince foreign investors that Argentina had put its financial house in order. On her recent trip to Germany she met with bankers and toured a Volkswagen car plant.

On Monday she gave a speech on human rights and global justice before 450 people at [New York University](#) School of Law. On Wednesday she and her husband will have a private meeting with former President [Bill Clinton](#) in Manhattan. On Friday she will meet with [Tzipi Livni](#), the Israeli minister for foreign affairs.

The traveling and mingling with the foreign elite has drawn withering criticism at home from her rivals.

"Those who leave their country before an election do so because they cannot connect with the people in their own country," said Elisa Carrió, a center-left member of Congress who is running a distant second to Mrs. Kirchner in polls, with at most 15 percent of the vote. "You have to demonstrate your leadership inside the country, make contact with the people. Don't use the position of first lady to make an election campaign."

Despite her apparent discomfort mingling with the masses, Mrs. Kirchner has not felt threatened by any candidate. Other than Ms. Carrió, her opponents include a former economy minister, [Roberto Lavagna](#), and a free-market economist, Ricardo López Murphy.

The opposition is so weak that Mrs. Kirchner has been able to all but ignore the Argentine news media, choosing to give select interviews to journalists abroad.

“There is no political debate in this country right now,” said Walter Curia, an editor at the newspaper Clarín and author of “The Last Peronist,” a study of Mr. Kirchner. “The only debate is within the walls of the Pink House.”

Mrs. Kirchner seems less interested in emulating Eva Perón, the powerful and beloved first lady of President Juan Perón, than she is her idol, [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#). Both are lawyers with husbands who hailed from political backwaters and became president, though Mrs. Kirchner has been quick to point out that she was elected a senator before her husband began his career in politics.

Analysts speculate that Argentina’s relationship with the United States could improve if she and Mrs. Clinton were both elected. The two have met twice, at Mrs. Kirchner’s request, once in Washington in 2003, where the discussion focused on the unsolved bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, and again at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004. Mrs. Kirchner has even appeared to steal a page from Mrs. Clinton, reportedly putting together a health care reform plan as part of her domestic agenda.

Mrs. Kirchner might learn a lesson from Mrs. Clinton’s image makeover, said Mr. Shifter of Inter-American Dialogue. As first lady, Mrs. Clinton was seen by many as bossy and abrasive. Her experience on a “listening tour” in New York state during her Senate campaign, by some accounts, softened that image. “It was humbling and effective,” Mr. Shifter said. “Cristina could probably benefit from something like that. Humility is not her strength.”