

Argentine first lady seeks presidency

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

First lady Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, whose husband is credited with Argentina's rebound from an economic collapse, overshadowed 13 rivals Sunday in her bid to become her country's first elected woman president.

Fernandez, a senator who harnessed President Nestor Kirchner's achievements in bringing Argentina back from a \$100 billion debt default, won the support of many Argentines despite offering few original proposals.

Her closest challengers, former lawmaker Elisa Carrio and former Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna, were trying to force her into a Nov. 25 runoff, but all major pre-election polls showed her getting the 40 percent - with a lead of more than 10 percent - she needs to win outright.

Argentina's 27.1 million registered voters, who are required by law to cast ballots, were also filling dozens of House and Senate seats and nine governorships, including the post in powerful Buenos Aires province where 40 percent of the electorate resides.

Voting was peaceful at more than 12,700 polling stations nationwide, the balloting taking place under sunny skies in most of Argentina. At one Buenos Aires voting station, 46-year-old building manager Ramon Medina grumbled that the top two candidates were both women.

"There isn't any man capable of taking on the presidency," he complained. "We (men) don't have a strong candidate."

The first couple voted early in the province of Santa Cruz, where he was a three-term governor, before heading back to the capital to await the outcome. Fernandez told the crowd of reporters that voting was especially joyful for her because she grew up under the 1976-83 dictatorship.

"I'm part of a generation that grew up in a country in which nobody could say anything, so we value this in a very special way," she said.

Carrio and Lavagna voted in the Buenos Aires area.

The next president, who begins a four-year term on Dec. 10, faces challenges including high inflation, an energy shortage and rampant crime. And the legacy of the economic crisis can still be seen in high unemployment and widespread poverty in a country that a century ago ranked among the world's 10 richest.

Fernandez refused to debate and spent much of the campaign abroad in photo-ops with world leaders. Her chic European dresses and designer bags drew comparisons with "Evita" Peron, another fashion-conscious and politically influential Argentine first lady.

She has also been compared to U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who like Fernandez is a lawyer and senator who soldiered alongside a husband as he rose from small-state governor to his nation's presidency.

Fernandez rejected both comparisons.

"I don't want to be compared with Hillary Clinton or with Evita Peron, or with anybody," she said recently. "There's nothing better than being yourself."