

In Argentina, a Campaign Promising Change Offers More of the Same

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 27 — When Cristina Fernández de Kirchner announced in July that she would seek to succeed her husband, [Néstor Kirchner](#), as [Argentina](#)'s president, the power couple said “change was just beginning.”

But that early campaign slogan, an effort to gently distance her from Mr. Kirchner, failed to resonate with the president's supporters, who favored more of the same policies that pulled Argentina from the depths of its crushing financial crisis in 2001 and have helped the economy grow by some 50 percent.

On a rainy Thursday night here, in Mrs. Kirchner's final campaign event before Sunday's election, the couple many refer to as the “ Clintons of the South” left little doubt that her likely victory would mean more of the same.

“We had the dream of recovering the dignity of millions of Argentines that woke up every day with nowhere to go,” she said from the same outdoor market in La Matanza, an industrial town on the fringes of the capital, where her husband appeared in the waning days of his campaign. Her husband, whom she referred to more than once, sat at her side.

Leading up to the election, Mrs. Kirchner, a 54-year-old senator from the center-left Peronist party, was leading in polls with more than 40 percent of the vote, about 25 percentage points ahead of her nearest rival, Elisa Carrió, a center-left congresswoman. Mrs. Kirchner appeared to have enough support to avoid a run-off and be elected outright.

Besides making her the first woman to be elected president in Argentina, a victory would also make her the second woman in two years to be elected president of a Latin American country. Michelle Bachelet was elected president of Chile last year. But unlike Ms. Bachelet, Mrs. Kirchner is striding into the presidency with remarkable ease. Mrs. Kirchner has campaigned lightly in her own country, choosing instead to spend much of the past two months in Europe and the United States trying to woo international investors and look presidential beside world leaders.

For Argentina — and for South America — Mrs. Kirchner's likely victory would create a paradox. Unlike Venezuela's [Hugo Chávez](#), Bolivia's Evo Morales or even Brazil's [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#), all essentially populist leaders hailing from humble backgrounds, Mrs. Kirchner is a proudly intellectual lawyer who is more at home mingling with presidents than with everyday people.

But the bulk of support she inherits from her husband comes squarely from Argentina's lower classes, many of whom see Mrs. Kirchner as aloof and tough to comprehend in

speeches that often resemble university lectures. She could risk losing their support if she does not adjust her husband's economic policies to stem rising inflation and prevent a looming energy crisis.

Mrs. Kirchner has had problems generating appeal among the middle and upper classes, Argentine pollsters say.

"As inflation continues to rise, the lower classes will suffer, and she runs the risk of ending up with no support at all," said Daniel Kerner, an analyst at Eurasia Group in New York.

Still, Mrs. Kirchner is already the most powerful Argentine woman since Eva Perón helped her husband, Gen. [Juan Domingo Perón](#), rule the country from 1946 until her death in 1952. (Mr. Perón's third wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón, known as Isabelita, who was vice president when he died in 1974, led the country for two tumultuous years before being deposed in a military coup.)

Mrs. Kirchner has called herself part of a "new generation" of Argentine leaders. And few here, including her, see much similarity between her and Eva Perón, who displayed a legendary touch with the public. Mrs. Kirchner, for instance, refused to debate the other candidates and gave few interviews during the campaign, preferring controlled environments to open forums.

"She seems like a cold person," said Sandra Mansilla, 42, an undecided voter in the hardscrabble Lomas de Zamora neighborhood, trying to explain why she was leaning against voting for Mrs. Kirchner. "I still don't feel like I know her. She just makes me nervous."

But to supporters who attended her rally here on Thursday, many of whom were bused in by Peronist Party functionaries, the Kirchners are an improvement over previous leaders. "What we want is more stability, and Cristina is the best candidate to give us that, the best person to make sure we don't go back to the economic misery we had before," said Eduardo Díaz, 60, a retired factory worker in La Matanza.

The Kirchners, who met in law school as student activists, expressed support for each other during the campaign's final days. "What is coming is much better than us," Mr. Kirchner said at an event on Thursday. His wife promised that he would continue to be involved in politics, even if he had no formal role in the government. "He is a political animal in the true sense of the word," she said.

Mr. Kirchner's decision not to run was a calculated move by the couple to try to tag-team the presidency for the next 12 years, most analysts contend. They say Mr. Kirchner feared a lame-duck second term. And Argentina's election law allows a former president to run again after waiting four years.

For her part, Mrs. Kirchner faces some tough policy decisions if she is elected.

In radio and television interviews this week, she defended official figures pegging inflation at 8 to 10 percent — less than half what a host of outside economists say is the real level. Some prices are clearly on the rise; consumer groups this month boycotted tomatoes after the item more than doubled in price to a level higher than some cuts of beef.

The next government will also face the real possibilities of energy shortages. Subsidies intended to keep energy prices low for consumers have contributed to a shortage of natural gas and electricity that could lead to brownouts or blackouts as early as next year, analysts say. Mrs. Kirchner, like her husband, has insisted there is no crisis and expressed confidence that the needed investment would come in time to avoid politically costly shortfalls.

She has promised closer ties with Europe, and with the United States, which her husband all but snubbed in recent years as he focused his efforts on restoring the country's economy.

International investors will be watching to see whether Mrs. Kirchner tries to resolve Argentina's outstanding issues with the [International Monetary Fund](#). The country defaulted on some \$80 billion in debt before offering a restructuring plan in 2005. Some bondholders rejected the offer, leaving Argentina in default of \$26 billion and unable to issue debt abroad.

While other Latin American leaders have worked on buffing their image as populists, Mrs. Kirchner has focused on polishing herself into a world stateswoman. Her wardrobe and makeup have come a long way since her days living in her husband's Patagonia province of Santa Cruz. She has also tried to become a policy wonk, organizing meetings with groups of intellectuals during recent visits to Mexico and Spain, said Riordan Roett, the director of the Latin American Studies Program at the [Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies](#).

While the Kirchners are a formidable political team, they are in some ways opposites. Mr. Kirchner obsesses over economic data every morning, while his wife spends at least an hour reading local and international press reports, paying particular attention to stories about politics and social trends in the United States, said two government insiders.

With Mr. Kirchner expected to have a large role behind the scenes in running the country, some wonder who will really be in charge. "How will the couple handle disagreements on major policy issues?" Mr. Kerner said. "In Argentina, where all decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of one or two people, this becomes a problem."