

Argentina's First Lady Wins Presidency by Wide Margin

Fernandez de Kirchner Vows to 'Deepen' Policies

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 28 -- The presidency of Argentina was handed from husband to wife Sunday, as first lady Cristina Fernández de Kirchner crushed 13 opposition candidates on the promise of adhering to the political principles that made President Néstor Kirchner one of Latin America's most popular leaders.

Results with around 95 percent of polling places reporting showed that Fernández de Kirchner had received about 45 percent of the vote, nearly twice that of the second place finisher and enough of a margin to avoid a runoff.

The victory makes her the second woman to be elected president in South America in the past two years, after Chile's Michelle Bachelet.

Fernández de Kirchner, 54, was a nationally recognized senator before her husband was elected president in 2003. But she pegged her presidential campaign to the successes of his term, in which there were four years of strong growth following the country's 2001 economic collapse and \$100 billion debt default. She offered few concrete proposals during the electoral race, but promised to "deepen the change" that her husband's government instituted.

"A little more than four-and-a-half years ago, Argentines were living in difficult times of fragmentation and of confrontation," she said during a victory speech Sunday night in which she credited her husband with stabilizing the country. "The man who today accompanies me, who has been my companion all my life, assumed the presidency under very different circumstances than we have today."

Like her husband, Fernández de Kirchner is a fiery and often combative orator whose politics are rooted in the brand of populism made famous here by former strongman president Juan Perón and his wife, Eva. Néstor Kirchner's government steered the country away from the free-market policies of the 1990s that the Kirchners -- along with a large percentage of the population -- blame for the economic crisis. Fernández de Kirchner has vowed to remain defiantly opposed to the advice of global lending institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

To her supporters, such declarations of economic independence -- together with a long history of holding Argentina's 1976-83 military dictatorship responsible for human rights abuses -- count as the Kirchners' principle strengths. Fernández de Kirchner's campaign

literature drew parallels between her and Eva Perón, who is revered here as a champion of social justice and defender of the poor.

"Cristina will lead a government that represents all of the people, but the rest of the candidates want to govern just for the elites," said Néstor Arevalo, 38, who cast a ballot for Fernández de Kirchner in the province of Buenos Aires on Sunday. "She has proven herself to be a fighter for human rights, and that is very important in a country with a history like ours."

Raised in the provincial city of La Plata, Fernández de Kirchner was a student activist in the 1970s who supported the Perónist party and opposed a military dictatorship that had no tolerance for dissent. She met her husband while in law school there, and after the two moved together to the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz, they formed an alliance that soon dominated the region's political landscape. He was elected the province's governor, and she became its senator. After he was elected president, she won a third term in the Senate in 2005, this time representing the province of Buenos Aires, the country's largest.

Her initial terms in the legislature established her as an active lawmaker, regularly challenging then-President Carlos Menem and championing reforms calling for a more transparent government. But aside from aggressively promoting reforms of the country's Supreme Court, her most recent term has been comparatively inactive and marked by reversals of some of her earlier positions.

"After her husband became the president, something changed in her," said Laura Alonso, executive director of Poder Ciudadano, a Buenos Aires-based organization affiliated with Transparency International. "Before, she was a great defender of the access of information law. And after he became president, she hated that law."

The idea that the Kirchners seek to accumulate power and stifle opposition is a handy dart thrown often by their critics. Néstor Kirchner's administration was led by a tight circle of close advisers, including his wife, and he never held cabinet meetings. When he announced this year that he would not run for reelection and would instead support his wife's bid, many interpreted it as a ploy by the couple to try to alternate terms and occupy the nation's top office for as long as 16 years.

"Nothing concerns them more than just staying in power," said Guillermo Dacini, 47, a banker who voted against Fernández de Kirchner on Sunday. "She's the same as her husband -- very authoritarian."

But the relative health of the economy -- which during Néstor Kirchner's term grew 8 percent annually, with unemployment dipping to 15-year lows -- was a key factor in preventing the complaints of the opposition candidates from igniting voters' passions. The early exit polls suggested that former congresswoman Elisa Carrió came in second with about 25 percent of the vote, followed by former economy minister Roberto Lavagna with about 15 percent.

The main difference between the outgoing and incoming presidents is one of style, according to political analysts. Whereas Néstor Kirchner is often brusque with world leaders and prone to gaffes of protocol, Fernández de Kirchner has cultivated a more diplomatic image and appears more concerned with courting foreign investment and polishing Argentina's image abroad.

"He has appeared very domestically oriented, whereas she appears much more prone to talk to the outside world and to engage other people in conversation," said Maria Victoria Murillo, a Latin American political scientist at Columbia University in New York. "She has been willing to meet with employers' associations and entrepreneurs to a much larger extent than he has been."

But when most people here speak about Fernández de Kirchner's style, they have something more superficial in mind. When she assumes office in December, the glamour quotient behind Argentina's presidential podium will instantly, and unapologetically, soar. Reporters here write often about her generously applied mascara, the prices of her luxurious Hermès Birkin handbags and her shopping trips to designer boutiques in Paris. The apparent contradiction between her populist discourse and her reputation as a fashionista is the same one that defined Eva Perón, and Fernández de Kirchner appears unconcerned by those who have tried to fault her for it.

She told journalist Olga Wornat, her biographer, who has known her since her university days, that others have no right to expect her to surrender her femininity just because it doesn't conform to political stereotypes.

Since she was 15 years old, Fernández de Kirchner said, she had used a lot of makeup. "I love being a woman. I make myself up like any other woman, and it was always that way."

Venezuela Increasingly A Conduit For Cocaine

Smugglers Exploit Graft, Icy Relations With U.S.

By [Juan Forero](#)

Washington Post Foreign Service
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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#) -- Colombian drug kingpins in league with corrupt Venezuelan military officers are increasingly using this country as a way station for smuggling cocaine to the United States and [Europe](#), according to Colombian and U.S. officials. The Bush administration's dismal relations with [Venezuela](#)'s government have made matters worse, anti-drug agencies say, paralyzing counternarcotics cooperation.

Venezuela does not cultivate the leaf from which cocaine is derived. Instead, this country on [South America](#)'s northern fringe, along with [Ecuador](#) and [Central America](#), has long been a stopover for cocaine produced in neighboring [Colombia](#), the world's top producer.

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Mercedes Eloisa Caraballo holds a photo of her son Deivi Alexander Batista, who was killed by gang members in Caracas, where drug crime is steadily rising. (By Juan Forero -- The Washington Post)

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Now, however, the volume of cocaine trafficked through Venezuela has risen sharply. Shipments have increased significantly, with suspected northbound drug flights out of the country increasing threefold from 2003 to 2006, according to American radar tracking. Counter-drug officials say up to 220 tons of cocaine -- a third of what Colombia produces -- now pass through Venezuela, double the figure in the 1990s. Most of it is bound for the United States and burgeoning markets in [Spain](#), [Britain](#) and [Italy](#).

The traffickers have operated with illegally obtained Venezuelan identification cards from agencies as varied as the [National Guard](#), the DISIP intelligence agency and even the economy ministry, all while living in some of the finest neighborhoods in the Venezuelan capital, according to authorities in [Bogota](#), the Colombian capital, and in [Caracas](#). The trend has led to spiraling turf wars among drug gangs in Caracas slums and has directly challenged the government's ability to rein in corruption.

"The problem of drugs has gotten out of the hands of Venezuela," said Mildred Camero, a former drug czar in President Hugo Chávez's government and now a consultant on narcotics to the [United Nations](#), the United States and private industry.

"Now the situation in Venezuela is grave, grave, grave," Camero added. "At some moment, we're going to collapse."

In an interview, Venezuelan Attorney General Isaías Rodríguez characterized the corruption as isolated and said the government has made fighting the drug trade a priority. But he acknowledged the problem and said traffickers have corrupted some Venezuelan officials while working hand in hand with others.

"In the DISIP, which is the intelligence police, and undoubtedly in some sectors of the National Guard, there is complacency or participation in drug trafficking," Rodríguez said. "And not just them, but civil officials at airports."

Rodríguez said his office is investigating officials in the judicial police and the armed forces who are suspected of having supplied government ID cards to traffickers or provided



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them with protection. Among the high-level officials under investigation are three National Guard generals, including Alexis Maneiro, a former head of intelligence.

In response to U.S. criticism that Venezuela has failed to make anti-drug operations a priority, Rodríguez said he has fired 23 prosecutors and 150 judges tainted by the trade, while overseeing stepped-up prosecutions leading to 3,670 convictions since 2000. He also said Camero's replacement as drug czar, Luis Correa, was removed from office this year as rumors swirled -- many of them provided by Colombian traffickers -- that he cooperated with cocaine kingpins. Correa has denied the accusations.

"Before, there was no control," Rodríguez said. "That's why we think it's absurd and absolutely unjust the declarations that the Bush administration makes at this moment."

Finding the 'Weaknesses'

Counter-drug officials in Washington say Venezuela's failure comes just as increased pressure on cartels in Colombia -- part of a seven-year, \$5 billion counternarcotics campaign funded by the United States -- is forcing traffickers out. The campaign has led to the arrest of major trafficking suspects, including Diego Montoya, the Norte del Valle cartel leader arrested in September.