

Kirchners: Two for the price of one

The Miami Herald
Oct. 30, 2007

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's victory in Argentina's presidential election ushers in a political experiment that goes beyond national boundaries: that of "ruling couples."

It's not that the Kirchners have much global influence. But they precede by a year the power duo that the Clintons may form in the United States, which gives them an aura of importance that extends far beyond Latin America.

Néstor Kirchner, Cristina's husband and Argentina's current president, did not want to run for office again, despite being legally permitted to do so and voters' preference for him over her. According to Kirchner's inner circle, he wanted to avoid becoming a "lame duck" at the end of a second term in office.

Here lies a possible inspiration for the early hand-over to his wife. In Argentina, reelection is unlimited, as long as the president does not exceed two consecutive periods in office. So, in four years, Cristina may feel the same way and pass the baton back to Néstor, who in turn will retire in four years to avoid becoming a "lame duck," and so on.

"Buy two for the price of one," Bill Clinton joked about ruling couples when he first ran for president in 1992. Néstor Kirchner doesn't joke. Instead, he busies himself with organizing a political movement that will structure his project.

Like Bill and Hillary Clinton

No one believes that such an edifice can be detached from the government, or that he will abstain from taking part in his wife's decisions as president. So Argentines have, indeed, bought "two for the price of one." They have voted for continuity -- the core of Cristina's campaign -- because their situation is much improved since 2001 when the country was in the midst of economic and political crisis.

Maybe the most important point -- and a key difference with the Clintons -- is that this experiment begins in an Argentina that suffers from great institutional vulnerability. The Kirchners will be dealing with a parliament that is much weakened: Laws passed by legislators close to the government allow the president to "correct" the budget and issue "necessary and urgent" decrees that substitute for laws. The couple will practice a form of hyper-presidentialism.

Since 2001, the Kirchners have ruled with a siege mentality. They have built up an image of authority and moral inflexibility and have helped themselves by picking enemies who are damned by all and lacking in any kind of power to move against them (the weakened military, for example, or civilian members of the 1976-1983 dictatorship).

Meanwhile, the types of structural changes that Argentina needs have not been made. Corruption remains. The economic boom brought on by soaring global demand for commodities -- Argentina is a leading exporter of soy beans, corn, wheat, honey and limes, for example -- resulted from a shift in Argentine farming that predates the Kirchners: the old landholders have given way to operators with managerial skills.

Dependent on commodities

What the Kirchners have done well is to use the wealth gained from exports to strengthen the economy and improve conditions for the middle and lower classes. It is a significant achievement. But Argentina remains overly dependent on commodities and has failed to encourage economic activity based on its peoples' culture and ingenuity.

Moreover, manipulation of official statistics highlights the problems of an economic model based on peso depreciation and the accumulation of reserves. The main concern is inflation, which the government has covered up and contained by precarious price agreements that will not last very long once Cristina takes over.

Some officials claim that Cristina will bring in a new era of higher institutional quality. But the problem with "ruling couples" is that no law or democratic constitution could envisage them. This is why the Kirchners will rely on secrecy.

Hyper-presidentialism, inbred politics and a plan to keep power indefinitely through a legal technicality could put the Kirchners on the same level with the "caudillos for life" that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has brought back to the Latin American scene.