

Election results now final

The passing of power from Argentina's president to his wife was confirmed through final election results.

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BUENOS AIRES --

Final results confirmed Monday that Argentine first lady Sen. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner won election to replace her husband as president, setting off speculation about how she'll govern a country that has emerged from a deep economic crisis but hasn't yet found its footing.

At home, the 54-year-old president-elect will be under pressure to calm widespread worries about crime and violence.

On the international stage, she'll have to balance friendships with the United States and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who has lent Argentina billions of dollars.

She'll also have to contend with the consequences of the country defaulting on \$100 billion in debt in 2002.

Many analysts said they doubted that Argentina's economy could continue to grow at more than 8 percent a year, as it has since 2002, without further aggravating inflation, which some economists think is already 20 percent a year.

But curbing inflation by slowing wage increases, cutting public spending and implementing other unpopular measures could quickly cause a popular revolt among Fernández de Kirchner's supporters in the Peronist Justicialist party.

"This was a traditional Peronist party vote that came from the lower classes, and they'll be against any major shifts," political analyst Julio Burdman said.

Sunday's election results show that the first lady won by big margins in poorer districts such as the outskirts of the capital of Buenos Aires but lost in wealthier areas, such as within the capital itself.

FAR AHEAD

With 97 percent of voting stations reporting Monday, Fernández de Kirchner had 44.9 percent of the presidential vote, far ahead of former legislator Elisa Carrió, with 23 percent, and former Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna at 16.9 percent.

Fernández de Kirchner, who'll take office Dec. 10, won by the biggest margin of any Argentine president-elect since democracy was restored in 1983.

The election marked the first time that an elected president anywhere in the world had democratically transferred power to his wife. President Néstor Kirchner could have won reelection easily, public opinion polls show, but he stepped aside for his wife's run.

The president-elect's allies expanded their majority Sunday in the national legislature and retained control of key provinces such as Buenos Aires, where 37 percent of the country's voters live.

Despite that momentum, Fernández de Kirchner may not have enough political support to tackle the country's biggest problem: rising inflation. "Inflation is at the center of the discussion," Juan Luis Bour, the chief economist of the Latin American Economic Investigations Foundation, an Argentine research institute. "It affects everything else and determines whether we grow or not."

Bour said inflation had been sparked by factors such as overheated economic growth, a shortfall of investment that had prevented domestic industries from meeting demand and policies that had weakened the country's currency and hurt imports.

WORKING CLASS

Controlling inflation by curbing wage increases and cutting public spending would hit the working-class Argentines who voted in droves for the first lady the hardest. "I don't think she's going to go against her electoral base," Burdman said.

During her campaign, Fernández de Kirchner said official numbers pegging inflation at about 9 percent were correct and called higher estimates "the inflation of the opposition."

Her husband's government has capped prices on everything from natural gas to beef, which economists say has worsened the problem and scared off needed investment.

While Fernández de Kirchner reaped the benefits of her husband's popularity during the campaign, she also inherits one of his main headaches: the failure of economic growth to lift millions of Argentines from poverty.

More than a quarter of Argentines remain poor, although that number has fallen by nearly half since the country came out of a 1998-2002 economic crisis. Slums that sprouted around the capital during the 1990s have grown during Kirchner's government even as gleaming office towers are built throughout the city.