

Argentina's Fernandez succeeds husband as president

The Washington Post
December 10, 2007

BUENOS AIRES (Reuters) - Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner took office as Argentina's first elected female president on Monday in a rare husband-to-wife handover Argentines hope will sustain an historic economic boom.

Fernandez, a former first lady and senator, began a 4-year term promising to continue the policies of her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner, who presided over a dramatic recovery in South America's second-biggest economy.

Lawmakers in Congress, where the Kirchners' Peronist party holds a majority, cheered as Kirchner placed the light-blue and white striped presidential sash on his teary-eyed wife and tightly hugged her.

The Kirchners are Argentina's most politically powerful couple since Juan and Eva Peron, and they have been compared with former U.S. President Bill Clinton and his wife, presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Some analysts have dubbed them the Clintons of the South.

A forceful orator and glamorous dresser, Fernandez vowed in her inaugural address to Congress to fight poverty and push forward along the economic path carved by her husband,

Argentines credit Kirchner with helping the country rebound from a 2001-2002 economic crisis that saw one in two Argentines fall below the poverty line and the economy shrink by more than 10 percent in 2002 after a three-year recession.

"We want Argentines to have hope again," she said. "While there is one poor person in the country, we will always be one step away from a definitive victory."

But Fernandez faces high crime, stubborn inflation and energy shortages threatening to slow the country's biggest economic expansion in a century -- nearly five straight years of growth of more than 8 percent.

Leaders from across Latin America, several European countries and the head of the International Monetary Fund looked on as Fernandez was sworn in.

ECONOMIC MODEL

In her speech, Fernandez renewed a call for diplomatic efforts to win the release of hostages held by leftist Colombian rebels and offered Argentina's help. The hostages include former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was kidnapped in 2002 by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The appeal followed intensified calls for Betancourt to be freed by her family and even French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Thousands of Argentines lined the streets of downtown Buenos Aires, some banging drums, to cheer Fernandez as a motorcade carried her to the presidential palace.

"She's got a strong character. She's going to fight for the poor," said housewife Silvia Sergio, 59.

Many of Latin America's leftist leaders including Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Bolivian President Evo Morales and Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, see Fernandez as an ally.

"She's going to strengthen the process of change in the region," Chavez said.

Fernandez was a key adviser to Kirchner during his 4-1/2-year term, and he is expected to have an influential role during her administration.

A 54-year-old mother of two, Fernandez is keeping many of her husband's top aides and has vowed to deepen his economic model emphasizing state intervention in the economy, budget and trade surpluses and a weak currency to stimulate exports.

Kirchner steps down with high popularity ratings after taking power in 2003 with 22 percent of the vote, the weakest mandate in Argentine history.

He has never explained why he chose not to seek a second term and instead anointed his wife as his successor. Some analysts say the move is aimed at having the two rotate in the presidency, a claim they have denied.