

Roles Swap in Argentina's Palace as First Lady Takes Over

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BUENOS AIRES, Dec. 10 — [Néstor Kirchner](#), [Argentina](#)'s most popular president in decades, draped the light-blue-and-white sash over the shoulder of his wife, [Cristina Fernández de Kirchner](#), on Monday, officially passing power to the first woman to be elected Argentina's leader in its 191-year history.

The transfer of power was sealed with an emphatic, crowd-pleasing hug that seemed to make Mrs. Kirchner blush. She repeatedly stroked her husband's back during the embrace.

No modern-day couple in a democracy has carried out a comparable transfer of power, and certainly not in Latin America. In their four and a half years in the presidential palace, the couple, affectionately known as "the penguins" — a reference to Mr. Kirchner's Patagonian home state of Santa Cruz — have evolved into Latin America's Dynamic Duo, power brokers who hold sway over their country of 40 million people.

One major reason is Mr. Kirchner's stewardship following the country's worst financial crisis. The improvements in the country were, Mrs. Kirchner said, "a result of his convictions," which she added, "are also mine."

Since shortly after Mr. Kirchner announced in July that he would not run for re-election and would back his wife's candidacy instead, the couple have made little secret of their plans to lead together. On Monday, just after Mr. Kirchner passed the sash and presidential cane to his wife, thousands of square white pieces of paper fell from the rafters of the Congress reading "to deepen the change," referring to the next phase of their joint effort.

Mr. Kirchner is not the first Argentine president to try to draw his wife into a more powerful role. Gen. Juan Perón, Argentina's most revered leader, tried in 1951 to make his popular wife, Eva, his running mate. But the leaders of his party did not want a woman on the ticket and kept her off. She died in 1952.

Later, the general succeeded in making his third wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón, known as Isabel, his vice president. After he died in 1974, she became the first woman to serve as Argentina's president, serving nearly two years before she was ousted in a military coup.

[Imelda Marcos](#) was a powerful figure in the Philippine government led by her husband, Ferdinand. But after he was toppled in a coup in 1986, she went into exile with him, only to return after his death to run for president. She never won.

Even if [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) were to win the White House next November, her husband would not be the one to hand power over to her — though he would probably be very much at her side during her presidency.

Mrs. Kirchner conducted a carefully orchestrated campaign heavy on international diplomacy but light on opportunities for rigorous press questioning or debates with her rivals. In the end, facing a fractured opposition, she won emphatically, doubling the vote percentage that her husband was able to muster in 2003, when he got 22 percent before a rival dropped out.

“This says a lot about the weakness of Argentina’s political party institutions,” said Joan Caivano, director of special projects at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, who has studied the role of women in Latin American politics. “She was anointed by a very popular president, and that doesn’t feel like a good thing for a democracy.”

But few doubt that the 54-year-old Mrs. Kirchner, who served in Congress for a decade, has the political skills to lead. In her typically emphatic inauguration speech here on Monday, she set out an agenda that emphasized greater South American integration and a desire to return Argentina to the world stage after four years in which her husband focused on improving the economy after the crisis in 2001.

Argentina’s economy is poised to record a sixth year of 8 percent annual growth, and Mrs. Kirchner noted that hers would be the first Argentine government to begin its term without a fiscal deficit. She said she would seize the opportunity to begin a process of ridding Argentina of its debts to private bondholders. She was scheduled to meet Tuesday with [Dominique Strauss-Kahn](#), the president of the [International Monetary Fund](#).

Mrs. Kirchner will confront growing inflation, now pegged at nearly 20 percent by private economists, about double government claims, and a tightening energy situation. Just days ago Mr. Kirchner increased public transportation rates by 19 percent beginning next year, a sign that the government is concerned about its declining reserves.

She said she believed that strengthening the [Mercosur](#) trade union would be important to improving regional energy supplies, and she praised the formation on Sunday of a Bank of the South that will act as a South American-focused lending institution for development projects.

Mrs. Kirchner also showed a willingness to be a player in international diplomacy. She called on President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France to allow Argentina to help negotiate with Colombian guerrillas for the release of [Ingrid Betancourt](#), a hostage and former Colombian presidential candidate, whose mother watched Mrs. Kirchner’s speech from inside Congress. “I want to commit the force of our diplomacy and our country” to find a solution for her, she said.

And in what perhaps was a subtle dig at the United States, she called for the “reconstruction of multilateralism,” saying that “a unilateral world is a more insecure world and more unjust.”

She closed her speech with a rare display of emotion, acknowledging that her work will be cut out for her simply because she is a woman. She paid homage to female role models like the beloved Eva Perón and “to the women in the white handkerchiefs,”

referring to members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the group that fought relentlessly for information about their “disappeared” loved ones during Argentina’s military dictatorship.

“They dared to go where nobody else did,” Mrs. Kirchner said, her voice cracking as she looked up at some members of the group waving from a second-floor balcony. “Mothers and grandmothers of the homeland.”