

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2177>



Argentina

Why vote for the left?

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV437 - June 2011 -

Publication date: Sunday 12 June 2011

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Argentina will see a series of elections in the coming months. Provincial elections have already begun in Catamarca, Chubut and Salta. The presidential elections in October will be the culmination of an intense political process. This will include high-profile elections in the Federal Capital of Buenos Aires, in July, that will surely go to a second round. Then there will be compulsory primaries in August to weed out minority candidates – parties with less than the high threshold set by the new electoral law will be eliminated from the electoral race.

Turnout is likely to be high. In a context of increased participation, people are more interested in politics and the vote has recovered some of its prestige. So far the contenders include various candidates of the right, several strands of the ruling majority, some centre-left options and a left front.

1. Those of us who are active on the left, in the social movements and in intellectual life from a left perspective, need to take a public position in relation to these elections. Some comrades think we should abstain, recalling the protest value such a stance has had on various occasions in recent decades. They do not realize that this position has lost the significance it had a few years ago. Electoral indifference and the blank vote – as expressions of resistance to the prevailing order of oppression – have not only become weaker, they have now lost all political meaning. Abstention is not a symptom of protest, nor does it strengthen the social movements. It runs counter to the political awakening of young people, who are looking for political channels to articulate their demands and concerns. To neglect electoral intervention at the present time leads to self-isolation.

Many comrades agree with this analysis, but feel the electoral options on offer do not open up any new emancipatory project. For this reason they prefer individual votes of conscience, or a “programmatic” message scribbled on one or other of the existing tickets. There is plenty of evidence that such positions do not lead to effective political action. They are individual acts that do not help to develop real experience. To limit ourselves to a silent vote, effectively endorsing the principle of the secret ballot, contradicts the commitment to open, public participation that we have always defended on the left.

We have to understand that voting for particular candidates does not mean total support for their parties, programmes or past histories. It simply defines the direction of our intervention, based on our complete rejection of some alternatives and our commitment to others. Given this need to take part in the electoral fight, what are the options available?

2. The current electoral landscape includes various manifestations of the right, which are obviously the left's main enemy. It's important to be clear about who represents what here. Some comrades think that the representatives of reaction are spread across the spectrum of the mainstream and there's no point in distinguishing between them. They do not believe the right exists as a specific force. Others see it as something that is invented before elections to create a non-existent polarization. Both views seem to us mistaken.

The right does exist, with its own leaders and its own proposals. Its aim is to apply in this country the same policies that Santos implements in Colombia, Piñera in Chile or Calderón in Mexico. It represents directly the interests of imperialism and aims to restore neoliberal economic policy leading to more privatizations and trade liberalization. Its objectives were revealed when it demanded a reduction in export taxes and payment of the foreign debt through budget cuts, or when it opposed the nationalization of the AFJP pension funds [1]. It seeks to restrict democratic rights, annul the verdicts against those responsible for genocide (during Argentina's military dictatorship) and

generalize the repression against popular demonstrations. It hopes to reduce the age of criminal responsibility, in order to persecute impoverished youth. Its spokespeople are directly employed by the dominant media.

It is opposed to any democratisation of the media and acts as an agent of the Church and private education. So far this current has not managed to build a significant electoral option of its own, but it can fall back on Macri, Olmedo, Duhalde, Solá, Rodríguez Saa or De Narváez. It has representatives in the PRO, in the Federal PJ, in the UCR and in the Civic Coalition. [2] These candidates are poles apart from any kind of left activity. But it is important to understand that such representatives of the right are to be found not only on the opposition side of the spectrum.

There are many representatives of the right within the ruling coalition. This fact is glossed over by many government supporters who claim to represent progressive positions. They avoid talking about the provincial governors and city barons who prop up Cristina Fernandez at regional and national level while securing neoconservative policies on their home patch. They support damaging mining operations in San Juan, shore up the privileges of the oligarchy in Salta, back the Saadi in Catamarca, [3] evict small peasant farmers in Chaco, repress indigenous peoples in Formosa, top the corruption league in Córdoba and in Rioja they are behind Menem's alliance with the government.

Many government supporters recognize all this, but believe it is necessary to do deals with the 'caudillos' in order to ensure the country is 'governable' and achieve the hegemony needed to carry through the progressive policies of pure Kirchnerism. But commitments like these compromise the position of the whole government; they end up reinforcing the enormous profits of foreign companies and the fraud carried out by provincial elites, at the cost of the rest of the population. Such agreements are not inoffensive. They perpetuate the power of tiny minorities and the structural poverty of those who suffer malnutrition and are forced to emigrate. Support for a progressive project is completely incompatible with voting for these 'Kirchnerite' governors. Those who believe backing them is a way of backing the government while holding onto progressive principles are flying in the face of the obvious.

Lining up behind the government not only strengthens these power structures; it also leads some intellectuals to adopt a McCarthyite attitude when they come into conflict with the militant activity of the left. They find themselves repeating the official line which blames the victims and slanders the struggle of anti-bureaucratic currents.

3. So far Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK) leads in all the polls and looks set to win in October. This demonstrates that the government has recovered support as a result of three processes: economic growth, the consolidation of a number of social and democratic gains, and the debacle of her right-wing opponents. The continuing high level of economic activity is a result of favourable international circumstances, expansionary economic policies and the high rate of profitability that resulted from the crisis of 2001. The government has actively intervened to manage this situation. Its policies have helped rebuild the power of the ruling classes and generate an unprecedented level of profit for capitalist groups. This government support has tended to favour enormous business profits rather than real investment or "the hard work of the private sector". But at the same time some workers and popular sectors have also seen their incomes improve.

The right-wing opposition has proved incapable of developing its own alternative and has been battered by two years of successful, governmental counter attack. One central aspect of this counter attack was the granting of social benefits (wage increases, collective bargaining, contribution-free pensions, universal child benefit, more public sector jobs), as well as significant democratic gains (on the bringing to trial and imprisonment of those responsible for genocide during the military dictatorship, on media legislation, equal marriage rights and violence against women, as well as less repression against the right to protest).

Those who support voting for the government candidates from a progressive point of view say they want to "deepen" these conquests, as if these improvements were the main characteristic of the current administration. They downplay the huge imbalance between the vast profits obtained by the big capitalist groups from economic growth and the

modest progress achieved in workers' wages and jobs. This modest progress sits alongside continuing inequality which merely recycles poverty and job insecurity.

A left vote cannot lend support to an economic model based on agricultural exports that push us into ever more dependence on primary commodities, on the absence of progressive tax reforms, the running down of oil reserves, the destruction of the railways, the giving away of natural resources and the refusal of even partial indexation of pensions. We have to find ways to promote a distinct, anti-capitalist project and challenge the current path that maintains the polarization of society and prevents the redistribution of income.

Many progressive pro-government sectors recognize these limitations. They say "much still needs to be done" and that "the project needs to be improved from within". They suggest creating their own alliances with their own candidates within the pro-government "collector" lists [4] But being a part of the governmental coalition means accepting all that the president demands. It is a blank cheque that makes any initiative impossible unless it has the blessing of the Casa Rosada (presidential palace). It is a road that leads, not to the creation of a progressive current, but to accepting the discipline of the government. Such alignment will be even stricter this time, with a second mandate built around social pacts designed to reign in wage demands.

Uncritical promotion of the presidential figure could have grave consequences in the future. Peronism has a long, top-down history of demanding blind obedience to the "jefe" in the presidential palace, which some progressive sectors prefer to ignore. Such subordination also means living alongside the old Peronist placemen who run the political machine for the city barons. The support of the trade union bureaucracy is equally damaging. This sector has been receiving support from within the state to finance its gangs of thugs, attack activists and bankroll company unionism, while the leaders fill their pockets and are accountable to no one. Allying with the government means strengthening these power structures.

4. It is not enough to point out these problems. There is widespread support for the government at present. The majority of the population is well aware of the continuing social inequality, the drama of outsourcing, the absence of housing programmes, the breach between high-class private education and run-down state schools. But still fresh in their memory are all the earlier disasters of the Alliance government and the catastrophe it led to [5]. And the previous decade, under Menem, is seen by most as the antithesis of the current situation. Compared with the state of collapse which the country experienced at the start of the last decade, the reality today is seen as much more bearable. At the same time, the relative improvements obtained affect how people see their vote. This context has to be taken into account, when we explain our proposals from the left.

Our criticism has to be directed at the insufficient and precarious nature of the gains made, and not at denying their existence. These are conquests achieved by the popular movement, which can only be consolidated and developed over time, if a genuinely independent political force of the left is built. Blind opposition is too often a cover for political weakness. On the other hand, recognising these gains as a belated expression of the great rebellion of 2001 and the subsequent strikes and unemployed movements (known as piqueteros) allows us to relate to the broader masses on the basis of their reality.

5. The centre-left Proyecto Sur (South Project) [6] at first seemed to be questioning the government from a progressive point of view. It won significant electoral support in the Federal Capital and proceeded to denounce the government's deals with right-wing governors and to question the bureaucracy. It correctly criticized the devastation of the mining and oil industries, the dismantling of the railways and the stifling of any investigation into the foreign debt. From this point of view it attacked the murky business of "friendly capitalists" in public works concessions, the management of privatized public services, the absence of any audit in Social Security and the destruction of the National Statistics Office (INDEC). These positions allowed it to run in the state elections in Catamarca, for example, on a platform of opposition to the mining companies.

But a political organisation is not defined only by the proposals it makes. It matters also how it plans to implement them. And here a series of contradictions emerged with the alliances it had made with traditional political figures. These agreements prevented it from achieving its progressive aims. First it flirted with the other opposition parties in Group A [7], then there were a series of speeches that sounded very much like the right. In this way it repeated the ambiguity, silence or complicity with the big soya farmers that it had shown during the agricultural conflict. [8]

Proyecto Sur had an appealing proposal: to break with the Radical-Peronist two-party system and create a third option. It sought to distance itself from the political degeneration imposed by the party machines of the UCR and the PJ. [9] This initiative – which inspired so much enthusiasm – has been drowned in the political practice of the last year. Instead of working for a real third force, it began negotiations with a series of figures (Juez, Stolbizer, Binner) who are no different from the two-party system that is so-reviled. It is notable how far the traditional discourse of the Radicals has taken hold of Pino Solanas' public profile.

Such flirting with the right impedes the development of a progressive alternative. The main criticism made of the government is its “disrespect for institutional” and constitutional norms and procedures. It fails to mention that all capitalist governments flout the rules in order to favour those with the economic power. On the other hand its almost exclusive focus on corruption sounds very much like the vacuous rhetoric that the Alliance churned out against Menem over a decade ago.[See note 5 above.] Such a message does not go beyond the liberal orbit and reproduces the old, destructive prejudices against politics in general. What's more, it challenges the government in terms very similar to the dirty tricks campaign waged against them by ClarÃn. [10]

Proyecto Sur seeks to emulate the more conservative governments in neighbouring countries. But in choosing Dilma and Lula or Tabaré and Mugica as models to follow, it ends up policies that tend to preserve the status quo, especially in the social and human rights fields.

We still have much to do alongside the centre left. But those of us who defend anti-capitalist proposals and the cause of socialist emancipation, have to do this on the basis of building our own political organisation.

6. A characterization of the right, the government and the centre left is essential in the elections over the coming months, which will certainly involve second rounds between these forces. We ought to consider now what position we will take in such situations. It is unclear whether there will be any such runoff at national level, but it will almost certainly feature in the elections in Buenos Aires. So what attitude should we adopt?

Some comrades think that “all the bourgeois candidates are the same and should be rejected on block”. This is wrong. It implies that the popular movement is completely indifferent to the outcome of a dispute between reactionary and progressive candidates. It ignores the fact that such outcomes directly affect whether the conditions for popular struggle are more or less favourable. In extreme cases, this kind of abstract neutrality can lead in other countries of the region to abstaining from the struggles that pit Evo Morales or Hugo Chavez against the right. For the same reasons that the left has not traditionally argued for neutrality in trade union struggles against the bureaucracy, or in the social movement, nor should it do so when it comes to crucial electoral runoffs.

7. The left has had little electoral relevance in recent years. There have been a series of frustrating experiences with building fronts and selecting prominent popular leaders. In the end the left has been dispersed among a variety of parties standing and had no impact on the results. This has systematically discredited the left and allowed it to be seen as politically irrelevant. This electoral weakness has given rise to a distorted picture of the real weight of the left, both non-party and party, as a social and political presence in the popular organizations, in the trade unions, in the universities and in the cultural sphere. It does not reflect its capacity to mobilize in the streets and promote popular demands.

This electoral weakness reflects the same problems the left had in the previous decade, when it was unable to transform the 2001 rebellion into an organized political force. That uprising did not produce the mass alternative that it should have been possible to build in such exceptional circumstances. The frustration was the result of long-standing internal problems, of an inability to turn day-to-day militant activity into clear advances. Sectarian behaviour, dogmatism, the habits bred of isolation, a taste for self-promotion and the cult of building the apparatus, were all decisive in this failure. Such behaviour breeds in turn a reaction against all forms of organization, exaggerated illusions in “assembly” activity and, in the name of autonomy, the rejection of active participation in politics.

To build a left that can really undermine the dominant system, we have to break out of this vicious circle. But none of these limitations eclipses the basic fact: the left today brings together an important number of social fighters, who are to be found in the front line of popular demands, risking themselves in the struggles against thugs, as the murder of Mariano Ferreira demonstrated.

8. The opportunity to turn this combative spirit into a political step forward is now open again. The coming elections are an opportunity to do just that. The creation of the FIT [\[11\]](#) - in spite of any criticisms of the parties involved, the closed way it was set up and the fact it was presented as a *fait accompli* – could be the starting point for such a process.

After so many years of standing alone and pointless disputes between candidates of the same hue, a step has been taken towards unity. The trigger was an attempt by the government to exclude the left from the elections. Paradoxically, it was this danger that led to the dropping of all the disputes over programmes and candidates that had been blocking the creation of a front. As a result, it has been possible to establish something that in the coming months could put the left in the centre of the political stage. The big challenge is to decide how this space will be used.

9. The main battle ahead for the Front is the primaries that begin in August. These were imposed by the main parties with the aim of restoring the two-party system. The struggle against this hurdle is a democratic struggle of which most people remain completely ignorant. The State not only interferes in internal party life but imposes restrictive organizational clauses which could wipe the left off the electoral map. Given the sensitivity on democratic questions in the country and the widespread resurgence of political awareness, this attempt at proscription could backfire and give the left a new lease of life. The battle to secure a turnout of 300,000 in the primaries and the campaign to ensure the left's presence in the elections is a battle for the winning. Success in this would create a political situation of huge importance and would establish a very important electoral threshold for the vote in October. For us, building this campaign is a priority.

But the FIT can begin a political process that reaches beyond the elections if it creates the conditions for a real convergence of the whole of the left. Some parties have stood apart, others are in a variety of alliances and many organizations, currents, personalities and individual militants remain doubtful. Seeking convergences and the continuous broadening of the front would make this agreement much more attractive. The obligatory primaries could be used, for example, to organize different kinds of activities and debates with a plurality of views and a democratic dynamic. This multiplicity of views is essential if we are to bring together the left. The road is wide open for this kind of initiative.

10. It is in this sense that we believe it is necessary to:

a) Call for the broadest possible participation in the FIT's primaries, regardless of how people plan to vote in October, as a way of ensuring its presence in the elections and as a way of challenging the exclusionary nature of the political reform.

Why vote for the left?

- b) Vote in the first round for FIT candidates with the aim of electing left-wing members of parliament. Any advance in this direction will be positive.
- c) Open a debate on what position to adopt in any runoffs, both nationally and in the capital.

If we can convert the obligatory primaries into a victory that broadens competition, strengthens the front and introduces different opinions into the debate, this will be a political achievement that can regenerate hope in the left and open the way to building the kind of political organization the country needs.

Buenos Aires, May 18, 2010.

[1] These were all points of conflict between the government of Cristina Fernandez and the traditional right in the first years after she succeeded Nestor Kirchner (her husband) as President of Argentina in 2007. Her government's attempts to raise taxes or duties on grain exports, in particular, set it against the powerful soybean growers, who blocked roads and mounted a big campaign that eventually forced the government to give way. A few sectors of the left, including the Socialist Workers' Movement (MST), supported this mobilization, on the grounds that it also represented the interests of small farmers, and that the Kirchner-Fernandez governments were indistinguishable from other sections of the right. (Translator's note)

[2] Mauricio Macri is a former businessman and Chairman of Boca Juniors football club, who has become the most prominent leader of the Argentinean right. He set up Propuesta Republicana (PRO) along with Ricardo Lopez Murphy from the right wing of the UCR in 2005. Eduardo Duhalde, Alberto Rodrigues Saa, Felipe Solá and Francisco de Narváez are all figures from the right of the Peronist movement, with shifting alliances and rivalries between them. Federal Peronism, or Dissident Peronism has been one of their vehicles, as distinguished from the Official Peronism of the Partido Justicialista, led by Nestor Kirchner until his death last year. The UCR (Unión Cívica Radical) is Argentina's oldest bourgeois party and the traditional opposition to Peronism. The Civic Coalition is a centrist coalition bringing together heterogeneous strands from both the Radical and peronist traditions.

[3] The Saadi family, allies of former president Carlos Menem, dominated politics in Catamarca province for many years, amid allegations of fraud and criminal activity. Their control was eventually shaken in the 1990s by a national scandal over the murder of a young woman by the son of a local politician and its cover-up by the Saadi establishment.

[4] A curious feature of Argentinian electoral legislation, much exploited by the Kirchner governments, which allows parallel lists for other posts, for example Governors or senators, all to channel votes to the same presidential candidate, in this case Cristina Fernandez.

[5] The Alliance government of Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001) was a coalition between the UCR and Frepaso. Elected in opposition to the neoliberal policies of Carlos Menem, it collapsed in the midst of the economic crisis and popular revolt that gripped Argentina at the end of 2001.

[6] The Proyecto Sur Movement was launched in 2007 as a left, nationalist coalition around the figure of Pino Solanas, one of Argentina's best known film-makers. It includes sectors coming from the left of the Peronist tradition, different strands of the old Argentinean Socialist Party, the ex-maoist PCR and the trotskyst MST, among others. It has 11 elected members of parliament.

[7] The football metaphor is applied to the group of principal opposition parties, including UCR, Civic Coalition, PRO, etc.

[8] This was the 2008 conflict between the government and agribusiness sectors over export duties mentioned in Note 1.

[9] Partido Justicialista is the name of the mainstream Peronist party.

[10] Clarín is Argentina's best-known daily newspaper. The Clarín Group has waged an unrelenting campaign against the Kirchner governments from the right.

Why vote for the left?

[11] The Left and Workers' Front was launched in April 2011 by PO (Partido Obrero), PTS (Socialist Workers Party) and IS (Socialist Left), three of the main trotskyst currents in Argentina.