Consolidating Kirchner’s Control
The 2005 Elections in Argentina

By Mark P. Jones

President Nestor Kirchner assumed office on May 25, 2003 in a position of noteworthy weakness. Kirchner had “won” the presidential election only after former president Carlos Menem (1989-99), who on April 27 took the first round with 25 percent of the vote to Kirchner’s 22 percent share, withdrew from the May 18 runoff convinced that Kirchner would eventually defeat him by a substantial margin. To make matters worse, Kirchner owed even his second place finish to the support he received from being anointed as interim president Eduardo Duhalde’s (2002-03) favored successor.

Kirchner is a man neither accustomed to nor comfortable with governing from a position of weakness. Prior to becoming president, Kirchner served for 11 and a half years as governor of the province of Santa Cruz, where he enjoyed absolute power and a very successful tenure. As a consequence, upon taking office President Kirchner began a process of consolidating power, culminating with the October 2005 elections, which cemented his status as the unrivalled, and essentially unfettered, decision maker in Argentina.

On October 23 Argentina held elections to renew one third (24 of 72 seats) of its Senate, one half (127 of 257 seats) of its Chamber of Deputies, and one half of the provincial and municipal legislatures in many provinces. Every province (24 total) is represented by three senators who renew their mandates simultaneously every six years. Senators are elected from closed party lists, with seats allocated using proportional representation. Political party lists are created, and inter-party alliances are brokered, at the provincial level. The governing Justicialist Party (PJ, Peronists) presented lists throughout the country’s provinces under a variety of names (e.g., Justicialist Party, Front for Victory [FPV]) and in alliance with a host of different parties, including the country’s principal opposition party, the Radical Civic Union (UCR, Radicals), in several provinces (Corrientes, Neuquén, Santiago del Estero). In many places, multiple Peronist lists competed against each other, most commonly with one Peronist list being backed by Kirchner (often using the FPV label) and the other(s) backed by Kirchner opponents or “neutral” Peronists within the PJ in the province.

The most noteworthy clash between Peronist factions took place in the province of Buenos Aires (PBA), where 38 percent of the Argentine population resides. Since 1991, the PBA had been the fiefdom of former president Duhalde, who had also served as the PBA governor between 1991 and 1999. During his first two years in office, Kirchner maintained a tacit alliance with Duhalde under which the latter supported Kirchner in national-level affairs and Kirchner did not interfere with politics in the PBA. By July of 2005, however, Duhalde (and his powerful political machine in the PBA) represented the last main impediment to Kirchner’s political dominance of Argentina, and, taking a calculated risk, Kirchner broke with his predecessor and supporter and challenged the Duhalde machine in the October 23 elections.

Kirchner’s bold gambit was a smashing success. The PBA was one of eight provinces renewing its three senators on October 23. The Senate race there was the marquee event of the day, featur-
ing Kirchner’s spouse (Santa Cruz Senator Cristina Fernández de Kirchner) running under the FPV banner versus Duhalde’s spouse (former Deputy Hilda “Chiche” González de Duhalde) running under the Justicialist Front banner. Taking no chances, Kirchner tied his wife’s candidacy to several high profile and popular candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, including the adroit mayor of the province’s largest municipality, Alberto Balestrini of La Matanza, now the President of the Chamber, and Sergio Massa, the highly regarded head of the Argentine Social Security Administration, one of Peronism’s rising stars. “Cristina” soundly defeated “Chiche” (46 to 20 percent), thereby strengthening Kirchner’s control of Peronism at the national level (and in the PBA) and destroying Duhalde politically. Throughout the remainder of the year all but one of the duhaldista mayors (the machine’s backbone) migrated to the Kirchner ranks, as did most of the duhaldista legislators (though many of the latter remained in separate legislative delegations in the national and provincial legislatures). In doing so the ex-duhaldistas (as well as many other previously neutral or opposition Peronists who also joined the Kirchner ranks following the election) were simply following the logic that drives the behavior of most Peronists: “who wins, leads,” or “quien gana, conduce.”

As has been the case in every election since the return to democracy in 1983, few deputies and senators whose term ended in 2005 were re-elected. Only 19 deputies (15 percent) and six senators (25 percent) obtained re-election, numbers comparable to those in all elections held since 1983, where on average only one in five legislators achieved immediate re-election. Most of these departing

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The combination of the PJ’s electoral success and Kirchner’s destruction of the once powerful Duhalde political machine insured a Congress dominated by a Peronist contingent responsive to Kirchner. At present there exist three main Peronist delegations in the Chamber, the PJ-FPV (118 deputies: the “official” Kirchner delegation), Federal Peronism (31 rump Duhaldistas, most of whom are increasingly allied with Kirchner), and the Popular Movement Front (four deputies from the province of San Luis who respond to local boss Adolfo Rodríguez Saá). These three delegations, along with a host of sympathetic (or pliable) minor party delegations as well as many UCR deputies from provinces governed by Radicals (especially Catamarca, Corrientes, and Santiago del Estero), provide Kirchner with a reliable majority in the Chamber. Kirchner’s position in the Senate is even more comfortable, as the main PJ-FPV delegation occupies 42 of the 72 seats while Kirchner allies occupy another four seats. The PJ-FPV also controls 16 of the 24 powerful provincial governorships and three-fifths of Argentina’s mayoralties.

Facing a Kirchner-dominated Peronism that grows more hegemonic by the day is an increasingly fragmented opposition. The traditional partisan counterweight to Peronism, the UCR, is a mere shadow of its former self, possessing a scant 17 senators and 39 deputies. While its six governors and nearly 500 mayors make the UCR the country’s only opposition party with an effective national organization, the growing number of Radical governors, mayors, and legislators who have declared themselves Kirchner supporters or sympathizers has undermined the UCR’s ability to function as an effective opposition party. Faced with pressing economic needs that can only be addressed via funds provided by the national government, a majority of opposition governors and mayors (and the legislators who respond to their directives) eschew most opposition to Kirchner’s proposals and actions in exchange for the transfer of badly needed financial and material resources.

The remaining senators, deputies, governors, and mayors are divided among a host of minor parties. None of these parties holds more than two senate seats and one governorship. Other deputies also are spread among a multitude of minor parties, with only one, ARI (13 seats), possessing more than a dozen seats. As a consequence of this fragmentation, the only viable, albeit latent, opposition to Kirchner’s leadership lies within the PJ, not among the opposition parties, which are weak as well as hopelessly divided. Along these latter lines, while it is true that Peronist lists were defeated on October 23 in three of the four most populous provinces after the PBA, the victorious candidate/party in each province was different: the PRO of Mauricio Macri (president of Argentina’s most successful and popular soccer club, Boca Juniors) in the Federal Capital, the Socialist Party of Hermes Binner in Santa Fé, and the UCR of Julio Cobos in Mendoza.

By the end of the day, on October 23 Néstor Kirchner had successfully completed the quest begun in May of 2003 to consolidate his control over the Argentine political system. He had demolished his sole remaining rival, the duhaldista machine in the PBA, and established himself in firm control of a hegemonic Peronism, whose adversary is a divided and fragmented opposition, many of whose most prominent members consider themselves to be Kirchner allies. Kirchner put the finishing touches on this consolidation drive over the next four months by firing Minister of Economy Roberto Lavagna (who Kirchner had inherited from Duhalde) in November and replacing him with loyalist Felisa Miceli, then paying off all outstanding Argentine debt to the International Monetary Fund in one lump sum ($9.9 billion) in January (thereby reducing the role of the IMF in the Argentine political process), and passing controversial legislation in February to provide the government with increased control over the judicial branch. Today there exists no doubt that Kirchner is the unbounded leader of Argentina, facing few checks on his power from within Peronism, the opposition parties, or the other constitutional branches of government.

Lest we proclaim Néstor Kirchner “President for Life,” it is crucial to remember that politics in Argentina has little to do with ideology and programmatic public policy proposals and everything to do with populism, clientelism, patronage, and pork barrel politics. Kirchner’s current dominance of the Argentine political system therefore will continue only as long as he has access to the ample financial and material resources that are necessary to retain the loyalty of the all important provincial, and municipal-level party machines throughout the country. As a consequence, when Argentina again experiences an economic downturn (which also will negatively affect the President’s level of popular support) Kirchner’s current dominance will cease and his ability to govern effectively will be seriously challenged as the country’s governors, and the deputies and senators whom they control, will become increasingly less responsive to Kirchner’s demands while at the same time reassert their pressure on him to provide them with diminishing budgetary resources.

It is unclear if Argentina’s next serious economic downturn will take place prior to the fall of 2007, when Kirchner is eligible to run for re-election, or shortly thereafter in 2008. Taking into account Kirchner’s considerable political acumen, and assuming international factors that are largely beyond his control cooperate, the best bet is that Kirchner will be able to postpone the most serious economic problems facing Argentina until after the 2007 elections have passed, and that he will achieve reelection through 2011.

Mark P. Jones is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Rice University. His research focuses on the effect of electoral laws and other political institutions on governance, representation, and voting. He regularly serves as a consultant on Argentine government and politics for the U.S. government as well as for a variety of multinational institutions.