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Argentines hope new leader brings stability

Néstor Kirchner, governor of Santa Cruz, becomes president on May 25.

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor**

BUENOS AIRES – Nothing comes easy in Argentina these days. Even holding a simple election.

This Sunday's vote was supposed to put to rest 18 months of turmoil that saw five different presidents, massive debt default, a bank freeze, soaring unemployment, and sharp increases in crime and hunger.

Now that election won't happen. Former President Carlos Menem, who was trying to recapture the office he held throughout the 1990s, bowed out of the race Wednesday after lagging far behind in the polls. This paves the way for Néstor Kirchner, governor of the wealthy province of Santa Cruz, to take office May 25.

The furor caused by the last-minute departure by Mr. Menem - who helped Argentina out of economic crisis only to create a brand-new set of problems - reflects a growing disenchantment with the country's leaders and their often self-serving ways. Most here see his withdrawal as a face-saving effort to avoid an election drubbing in Sunday's two-man runoff - at the expense of the electoral process.

Observers say that most Argentines are simply looking for stability now and believe the solid if uncharismatic Kirchner can provide that, at least in the near term.

"I think it is going to be a middle-of-the-road government," says José Nun, an Argentine political scientist and former professor at the University of Toronto. Kirchner is expected to continue many of the stabilizing policies of his predecessor, President Eduardo Duhalde.

Honest and responsible

Widely viewed as honest and fiscally responsible, the lanky Kirchner talks with a lisp and often appears awkward and aloof on television. He does not wow voters with slick political rhetoric, which may partly explain his appeal. Mr. Menem drove fast cars and is married to a former Miss Universe.

Mr. Nun says Kirchner's policies are likely to mirror those of Mr. Duhalde, who made small steps to reverse the economic stagnation that has plagued the country for five years. By keeping Economics Minister Roberto Lavagna in place, Kirchner will allow negotiations with foreign investors and the International Monetary Fund over the country's \$141 billion debt default to continue uninterrupted.

Duhalde also helped establish better regional trade - notably with Brazil - a trend that Kirchner says he will continue. Kirchner is expected to work hard to strengthen ties within Mercosur, a regional trade pact made up of Argentina's neighboring countries. He has already traveled to Brazil and Chile to meet the presidents of those countries.

Kirchner campaigned on the fiscal strength of his oil-rich Patagonian province which he governed for the past 12 years. As president, Kirchner plans to spend money on public-works projects and build 3 million homes in four years, which he predicts will create 5 million jobs. One in 5 Argentines is currently without work.

Kirchner is critical of foreign companies and says the country needs its own industries to move beyond the crisis. He also says he may try to return to government control some companies that were privatized under Menem, such as the rail system.

Kirchner's province of Santa Cruz has one of the highest standards of living in Argentina - thanks in large part to its natural resources - and Kirchner wants to duplicate that nationwide. But opponents say that will be hard because the country is broke.

"This will be the first time that Kirchner has to govern without money, because we have always had a lot of money in Santa Cruz," says Omar Muniz, a legislator in Santa Cruz.

Carries a big stick

Critics also say that Kirchner's clean image, which he touted on the campaign trail, may be overblown.

Roberto Giubetich, an opposition legislator, says Kirchner used provincial funds to pay for campaign travel and TV ads. "I don't believe him with his rhetoric based on his honesty," he says Kirchner denies these charges.

Kirchner also carries a big stick. Critics say he used his political appointees and powerful family base - his wife is a senator and his sister the minister of social affairs - to suppress dissension in the local legislature and media. This kind of control will not be as easy on the national level, as he comes to office without an election mandate, receiving only 22 percent of the vote in April's five-person first-round election.

Still, Kirchner is squeaky clean compared with Menem, who was dogged by allegations of corruption for years. He spent six months under house arrest in 2001 over gun-smuggling charges that were later dropped.

As president from 1989 to 1999, he was credited with quashing inflation and opening Argentina up to significant foreign investment. Many Argentines purchased their first cars and took their first trips abroad thanks to the peso's one-to-one peg to the dollar. But many here blame him for the country's current economic crisis. Because of the peso-to-dollar peg, Argentina couldn't print money to cover expenditures as it had done before. Instead it borrowed wildly, saddling the country with it's current debt.

Now Argentina hopes for better things from their new president. "It's going to be hard...." says Martin Badia, a graphic designer. "I hope Kirchner is honest and he does the best for the people, not for himself - like everyone else who has been in power before."