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Argentines Choose from Hundreds of Political Parties

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Buenos Aires

In the U.S. presidential election, the choice is between the candidates of the two main political parties. No third party has a significant chance. But in many parts of the world, elections often mean choosing from dozens of candidates. In Argentina, legislation passed two years ago has led to the formation of hundreds of new political parties, complicating matters in an already complex and fragile democracy.

During Argentina's recent economic crisis, a popular slogan summed up the disgust many Argentines felt for their politicians. The phrase was simply: "Que se vayan todos!" or "Get them all out!"

Angry Argentines blamed their leaders for the country's devastating social conditions. Politicians were assaulted on the streets, their homes egged and vandalized. The discontent came to a head in December 2001, when then-President Fernando de la Rúa resigned, following bloody riots that left about 25 people dead.

One by-product of that turmoil was that Argentines actively sought to move away from what was traditionally a two-party political system. The two major parties, the Peronists and the Radicals, had benefited from a law that decreed that any party with less than two percent of the vote could not remain active.

That requirement was scrapped in 2002, and the number of parties has since ballooned. Argentina now has 41 nationally recognized political parties, and scores more at the provincial level. Just last year, 122 new parties were formed around the country, bringing the total number of officially recognized political parties in Argentina to 696.

Laura Musa is a congresswoman from Buenos Aires city, and a member of one of Argentina's new political parties, called ARI, or "Alternativa por una Republica de Iguales." That translates as, the Alternative Party for a Republic of Equals.

"The big parties, the traditional parties, do not represent the interests that these new parties try to represent," she said. "They are closed to new people, to new generations..."

Ms. Musa and other so-called "new breed" politicians in Argentina argue that the increase in the number of political parties means Argentines can better choose their representatives and speak their minds.

All of the parties, no matter what their size, qualify to receive government funds. Some skeptics wonder whether that financing provides greater motivation for forming a new party in some cases than political conviction.

"Only the parties that have a big number of voters have a bigger amount of money," says Alejandro Tullio, who oversees the distribution of public funds to political parties through Argentina's Interior Ministry. He acknowledges that some groups take advantage of the system. One minor party received nearly \$150,000 in funding last year, even though its presidential candidate got less than one-half percent of the vote. But Mr. Tullio also says that taking away this pillar of free society could damage Argentina's still delicate democracy.

"It would be very dangerous, if the government restricts the money of the public funding to the parties," he said. "In this case, we must be trustees of the liberty and freedom of organized political party, and they have a minimum amount of money in order that they can publish and express their ideas."

Not everyone agrees with the government's view. Congressman Mario Negri of the center-left Radical Party says that, ultimately, the new law still favors the large parties, like his own, and robs the government coffers.

Mr. Negri says the proliferation of political parties in Argentina does not always represent the ideas of the citizens. He says that, too often, new parties can be set up purely as a tool of the bigger parties during close elections. Then, after the vote, the new parties disappear. Mr. Negri calls it a business.

That may be says Laura Musa, the congresswoman from Buenos Aires. But for a country, and a region of the world, still healing from the wounds of brutal military dictatorships, Ms. Musa thinks the more chances for political expression, the better.

"I came from a time where you lost your life trying to have an opinion," she said.

Ms. Musa says the political system in Argentina today is far from perfect, but is a whole lot better than what the country had in its recent past.