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Argentina and the Falklands: the domestic politics behind Cristina Kirchner's protests

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There is a clear separation between President Cristina Kirchner's support at the international level and lack of it domestically. On one hand she is receiving cross-continental solidarity to her opposition to British oil drilling off the Falkland Islands at the current Rio Group summit of Latin American states in Mexico. On the other she is struggling from a weak political position at home. The focus on the Falklands may therefore be seen as not only a reassertion of Argentine ownership over them (which it has never renounced despite defeat against Britain in 1982), but also as a means of recovering political support, especially among the marginalised.

Cristina Kirchner's stock has fallen since her election in October 2007. Despite winning the presidency with 45% and by a margin of 22% from her nearest rival, she soon found herself embroiled in a political crisis. Months after taking office she introduced a variable tax on soybean exports, Kirchner faced opposition from the agricultural sector as producers went on strike and took to the streets and leading to the Senate overturning the policy in July 2008 and a subsequent cabinet reshuffle. Soon after came the global financial crisis and growing dissatisfaction in her presidency, from 41% in February 2009 to 54% by the end of the year according to Poliarquía Consultores. Along the way her husband and predecessor as president, Nestor Kirchner, achieved 30.8% of the poll in the mid-term legislative elections (more than the other two coalitions) in June 2009, but still lost majorities in both houses of Congress.

Indeed, the weakness of Cristina Kirchner's position can arguably be traced back to her husband's presidency. This may seem surprising since Nestor Kirchner's popularity rose during his term, at the same time that the economy appeared to be recovering after the 2001-02 financial crisis. That he achieved this was all the more impressive given his relative obscurity as the former governor of distant Santa Cruz province and the inauspicious way in which he gained the presidency (following former president Carlos Menem's decision to withdraw from the 2003 second round when it was clear that he would lose).

However, Nestor Kirchner was never able to build a sufficiently strong base of political and social support which would outlast his presidency and transfer to that of his wife's. First, despite his efforts to create a 'transversal' leftist coalition within and outside his Peronist party, he was unable to do so, meeting entrenched opposition from his party. By 2005 he had largely abandoned this project. Second, although his support was especially prominent among the unemployed and underemployed found in the picatero (picketing) movement, he failed to re-structure the economy, leaving his supporters dependent on economic recovery which was achieved at the hands of Argentina's traditional elites in the agricultural and export sectors.

Cristina Kirchner's appeal to her peers may therefore be seen as a way of reconnecting with the Argentine public. By emphasising an issue on which there is broad public support, she may be trying to appeal to the haves and haven-nots: both the economic elites who never supported her or her husband in the first place and their former supporters who lost out twice, first in 2001-02 and more recently since 2008.

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