

## Argentina: One More Year of Crisis and Uncertainty

Argentina, once famous as the "breadbasket of the world," is still looking for someone to blame after a year of socioeconomic and institutional crisis. In the 1950s, according to French economist Robert Boyer, Argentina had a standard of living comparable to that of developed countries, with an abundance of raw materials, a skilled labor force, good infrastructure, an interventionist state, and financial reserves. In the same country today, more than 52% of the population is below the poverty level. This translates into close to 18 million people, with seven million classified as living in extreme poverty.

Most Argentines and foreign observers unanimously condemn the mediocrity of the ruling elite and worry that the country is sinking deeper into chaos. So far, politicians have focused on elections as the way out of the crisis, with a new vote for president scheduled for May 25. The harshest critics, among them Luis Gruss of the newsmagazine *Tres Puntos*, argue that "these elections won't solve Argentina's problems, because they were called with the sole purpose of relegitimizing those who stole from the country."

What Argentina needs, according to Rosario Fraga of the Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría, is "political renewal, and political renewal means that society must assume responsibility for its role in politics." Speaking in an interview with CNN, she added, "as long as Argentina remains an individualistic society, leaving politics in the hands of *apparatchiks* and corrupt institutions, change will be very difficult."

After visiting the country recently, sociologist Alain Touraine asked, "Is Argentina capable of being governed? It's time to open the windows and air out the house. But politics is more than just knowing when to open or close the windows. You have to repair the roof and the walls, change the furniture, fill the refrigerator with food and worry about the children's future."

The tense political climate has led to internal rivalries within the Peronist Party (including the longstanding animosity between current President Eduardo Duhalde and his predecessor, Carlos Menem), the fragmentation of the Radical Civic Union, and the defection of presidential candidate Elisa Carrió from the Socialist Party.

Polls of voting preferences show between 10% and 15% support for Menem and Carrió, but more than 50% of those polled said they had absolutely no trust in these two candidates. Paradoxically, although the majority of Argentines reject Menem in particular and vow never to vote for him, they also believe that he will be the country's next president. This may explain columnist Olga Warnot's comments in *Cambio* magazine that "writing about Peronism is to recount the tragedy of Argentina, a story that repeats itself over and over, like a broken record."

Given current economic and social conditions, some observers claim that the only responsible course of action is reforming the constitution to establish new forms of representation and control over political figures. They argue that Argentina will remain ungovernable as long as three factors persist: the hostility between Congress and the judiciary, a society that is impatient and fed up with its leaders, and the dark circle of power that has controlled the country for the past few decades.

As political analyst Alejandro Gillone points out, "you can find Argentines all over the world, but it's impossible to pin down Argentina itself." As long as Argentine society does not accept responsibility for restoring the legitimacy of the state, a solution to the crisis will remain elusive. Among the measures needed are the commitment of honest and ethical individuals and sectors, a participative democracy supported by institutions that supervise and control political leaders, and a more balanced and competitive political system that allows Argentines to find themselves anew as a nation.