

# Social Revolution or Political Takeover? The Argentine Collapse of 2001 Reassessed\*

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## Abstract

In 1995, the Peronist party held Argentina's presidential office, a comfortable majority in both congressional chambers, and most provincial governorships and municipalities. In 2006, the political landscape looks exactly the same. However, between 2001 and 2002 the country arguably went through its most serious crisis ever, which led to massive popular uprisings, the early resignation of two presidents, and the largest debt default in international history. This article questions the widespread vision that sees the political collapse as a spontaneous and definite rupture with the past. Instead, it argues that the social revolt (a composite of *cacerolazos*, *piquetes* and *asambleas*) detonated in December 2001 was not only temporally and territorially limited, but also politically nurtured and institutionally bounded.

## Introduction

In 1995, the *Justicialista* party held Argentina's presidential office, a comfortable majority in both congressional chambers, and most provincial governorships and municipalities. In 2006, the political landscape looks exactly the same. However, between 2001 and 2002 the country arguably went through its most serious crisis ever, which led to massive popular uprisings, the early resignation of two presidents and the largest debt default in international history. This article questions a widespread vision that sees the collapse as a spontaneous and definite rupture with the past (for an exception see Levitsky and Murillo 2003). Instead, it argues that the social revolt detonated in December 2001 was not only temporally and territorially limited, but also politically nurtured and institutionally bounded.

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After a brief introduction to Argentine politics, the article proceeds through three steps. In each of them, the methodology consists of postulating a dichotomic question and elaborating a response through empirical probe. First, the article explores how the stage for the collapse was set and wonders whether it was preventable or unavoidable. Second, it describes the popular rebellion and examines the degree to which it was spontaneous or organized. Third, it analyzes the aftermath and analyzes the role played by alternative political actors, namely the Congress and the provincial governors. The last part summarizes and concludes.

The sources of this paper are mainly two. First, I draw on what I personally witnessed from my position as government advisor when the events unfolded.<sup>1</sup> This condition allowed me to have direct contact with key actors – both from the ruling coalition and the opposition – and to conduct further interviews. Second, I make use of newspapers accounts. This is a convenient way to organize chronologically the narration, compare present knowledge with the protagonists' at the time of the events, and control for any author's bias. The two leading national newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, have been reviewed for this research. The former should be especially credited for having carried out, five months and one year after the events, two in-depth journalistic investigations.

## **An overview of Argentine politics**

Between 1930 and 1983, Argentina went through half a century of political instability and economic decline. Political instability manifested itself in six overt *coups d'état* and at least as many *coups de palace*. As a consequence, only three presidents out of twenty-three managed to complete a pre-established mandate: Agustín P. Justo, Juan D. Perón and Jorge R. Videla.<sup>2</sup> The fact that all three were military officers – albeit not all came to power through military *golpe* – is telling of the obstacles faced by civilians to stay in office. In turn, economic decline is revealed by cyclical crises, high and chronic inflation and long-term GDP per capita deterioration vis-à-vis both developed countries and regional neighbors. A significant indicator of this trend is that, whereas in

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1 January and 20 December 2001, I served as cabinet advisor to the deputy minister of Justice, Melchor Cruchaga. Incidentally, the minister of Justice and Human Rights was Jorge De la Rúa, a prestigious lawyer who happened to be brother to the President.

<sup>2</sup> Justo's term ran through 1932 and 1938, though his administration was characterized by systematic electoral fraud; Perón was elected three times, but he only managed to complete the first one between 1946 and 1952; and Videla governed in the period 1976-81, as had been established not by the Constitution but by a military statute that superseded it.

the 1950s Argentina accounted for half of the Latin American GDP, by 1980 it had long been surpassed by Brazil and Mexico and its regional share was below 17% (WBDI several years). However, political instability apparently came to an end in 1983, while economic decline seemed to reverse its course in 1991.

In 1983, in the wake of the foreign debt crisis and a defeat at war, the military returned to the barracks and democracy and the rule of law were restored. The armed forces never took power again, although a significant uncertainty (generated by a handful of military uprisings) was not over until 1990. The newly inaugurated democratic regime was to be the long-lasting ever in the history of the country. However, novelty came together with legacy: the same two parties that had dominated most of Argentine politics during the twentieth century, i.e. the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR or Radicals) and the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ or Peronists), won all the elections held since October 1983. Hence, during the following two decades the PJ governed the country for nearly twelve years while the UCR – alone or in coalition<sup>3</sup> – ruled for about eight years (Malamud 2004). In spite of their fairly equilibrated electoral performance, government performance differ widely across these parties: while the PJ was able to complete the two mandates to which it was elected (1989-95 and 1995-99), the UCR was unable to complete any of its two presidential terms (1983-89 and 1999-03). Notably, street manifestations were a factor in both anticipated terminations.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon has been dubbed “the new iron law of Argentine politics”, meaning that “non-Peronists are able to win presidential elections but are unable to govern until the end of their terms in office” (Calvo and Murillo 2005: 226). At the time of this writing, the PJ holds once again the executive office after receiving 60 percent of the vote – summing the totals of its three main candidates – in the presidential election held in April 2003.

In what regards the economy, the turning point occurred some time later, in 1991. Up to that moment, the Argentine society had been characterized by growing patterns of consumption that were not matched by production output. Ensuing

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<sup>3</sup> In 1999, a coalition formed by the UCR and FREPASO (*Frente para un País Solidario*) won the presidential elections, the former placing the president and the latter the vice-president. FREPASO was a newly born, mostly urban and middle-class party that aggregated disparate groups, from Peronist splinters to human rights advocates. Although it was slightly left to the center, its main concerns focused on combating corruption rather than promoting an ideological agenda.

<sup>4</sup> In 1989, President Raúl Alfonsín resigned six months before the end of his term due to economic turbulence and social tumults, which were fostered by the entourage of his already elected successor, Carlos Menem. The events that interrupted the second UCR mandate in 2001 are described below.

dissatisfaction, in addition to fostering political instability, further fed economic instability. As a consequence, the economic cycle showed high peaks and steep falls which ever-changing policies all but aggravated, leading to increasing deterioration as measured against international parameters (Prados de la Escosura 2000; Gerchunoff and Llach 2003). At the same time, the state apparatus was overextended but its effective capacities were extremely weak (O'Donnell 1993; Waisman 1998; Acuña 2001). Two catastrophic peaks of hyper-inflation, in 1989 and 1990, paved the way for dramatic policy turns. Just sworn in, PJ's President Carlos Menem embarked on an ambitious process of state reform, aiming at recovering stability and growth through massive privatization, economic deregulation and opening to world markets. His policies were remarkably successful in the first years, leading most observers to believe that Argentina had finally left the road to decadence and that joining the developed countries was a goal at hand. This article is set to analyze the events that showed how this belief was but delusion. Before doing so, though, a brief description of the country's institutional setting may be helpful for understanding the context of the political process.

The Argentine Constitution, drafted in 1853-60 and only slightly amended until 1994, established a federal system and a presidential form of government. A federal system means that the component sub-national units – called provinces – have autonomy to choose their own rulers and pass their own legislation, albeit subordinated to the federal legal framework. A presidential form of government means that the chief executive is elected for a fixed term through mechanisms independent from the national legislature – called Congress – such as a popular vote.

Federalism is a power-sharing arrangement that grants considerable competences to sub-national authorities, i.e. the governors, vis-à-vis national authorities. In Argentina, this constitutional room for maneuver has been further magnified by political practice, as governors have traditionally controlled the electoral politics of their provinces including party machines and electoral nominations. Hence, they have become powerful gate-keepers within their parties, holding large influence over political recruitment and career paths – even when their *protégées* are federal legislators, as their chance to run for reelection depend not on performance but on the will of their provincial boss (Botana 1977; Calvo et al 2001).

The Argentine type of presidentialism has traditionally been seen as conferring significant power to the chief executive in detriment of the parliamentary branch. The

alleged presidential dominance over the Argentine Congress was labeled as ‘hyperpresidentialism’ by the prestigious legal scholar Carlos Nino, and although further studies nuanced this claim, they supported its main argument (Nino 1992; Jones 1997; Ferreira Rubio and Goretti 1998). However, in the last years – even before the 2001 events that are the focus of this article – a growing literature has contributed to further moderate this view, arguing instead that congressional proceedings have effectively checked the executive in some crucial issues and forced it to negotiate (Etchemendy and Palermo 1998; Llanos 2002). In short, between 1983 and 2001 the political system exhibited a Congress capable of limiting executive power, though congressmen did not respond to a popular constituency but rather to the political will of their provincial bosses. This meant that the provincial governors had the capacity to obtain concessions from the federal government via congressional proxy.

The territorial basis of Argentine politics is also visible at the municipal level. Although municipalities do not enjoy the same degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the provinces as the latter do vis-à-vis the federal government, they do possess political autonomy and budgetary resources. This is especially so in areas of large demographic concentration, of which Greater Buenos Aires is the utmost instance.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, mayors have been traditionally able to control and mobilize large numbers of people, who mostly depend on clientelism and public handouts for subsistence (Auyero 1997). Remarkably, most departments of Greater Buenos Aires have traditionally been ruled by Peronist bosses.

The stage is ready: enter the actors.

### **The collapse: agency or fatality?**

The path that leads to disaster is usually easy to see... afterwards. In the case at stake, however, there was a growing succession of signs that led some observers to forecast the storm since the first clouds appeared on the horizon, on October 6, 2000. That day Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez resigned to the vice-presidency of the Republic and ignited a major crisis in the Alianza ruling coalition.

The Alianza had come to power in December 1999 after more than ten years of Peronist administration in the hands of Menem, whose neoliberal policies and alleged

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<sup>5</sup> According to the 2001 Census, more than 24% of the Argentine population (8,684,000 of 36,260,000) live in Greater Buenos Aires, which is made up of 24 departments of the Buenos Aires province that surround Buenos Aires city. It has an area of roughly 3,700 km<sup>2</sup> (i.e., 0.14% of the country total area) and, hence, an extremely high population density which in some zones exceeds 14,000 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.

corruption had contributed to galvanize the opposition forces. A loose coalition between Fernando De la Rúa's UCR and Álvarez's FREPASO, the Alianza campaigned on two issues: the continuity of the exchange peg and a strong stance against corruption. De la Rúa was a traditional politician known by his moderate positions and soft stances, while Álvarez had a younger and more combative profile – though not radical but rather pragmatic. Their cohabitation initially seemed to be smooth, but problems started to arise soon after the inauguration. Eventually, Álvarez's resignation came ten months after taking office on allegations that the administration had accommodated to corruption instead of combating it. In the background, economic stagnation acted as additional fuel to spreading dissatisfaction.

At first, De la Rúa tried to weather the crisis not by rebuilding the coalition in order to support his adjustment policies, but by isolating policy-making through surrounding himself with loyal ministers and cutting ad hoc deals with opposition leaders in Congress and provinces. After that, when the economic conditions aggravated, he reshuffled his cabinet and appointed former presidential rival Domingo Cavallo as economy minister in March 2001. Cavallo had previously served as star minister in Menem's cabinet, and although he left the administration in 1996 out of bitter disagreements, his figure was still associated with the policies of the 90s. Therefore, his appointment was repulsive for most of the president's party comrades and deeply alienated the partisan sources of support of the administration.

Cavallo's designation did not produce the expected impact on the economy. Instead, the country risk index continued to rise and bank deposits decreased rapidly, as a powerful expression of diminishing trust on financial and monetary stability. The mid-term elections of October 14 sentenced the administration in advance: although significant abstention and self-spoiled voting (*voto bronca*) captured the attention of both the media and the public and were read as general dissatisfaction with the political system, the concrete result was that the Alianza lost control of Congress to Peronism. According to public opinion surveys, popular discontent was generalized; its effects, however, were unevenly distributed across party lines. FREPASO virtually disappeared, whereas the UCR only resisted in a few provincial strongholds. Peronism, in turn, was internally divided as a result of unresolved struggles for leadership that were fed by the victories most provincial bosses carried in their districts. However, the top party leaders smelled the opportunity and started to make their moves.

The sign that the PJ was, if not pushing for an early termination of the presidential term, at least getting ready for such a possibility, came a few weeks after the elections. By the end of November, it was made public that the Peronist parliamentary group in the Senate had decided to nominate, from among its members, a candidate for the Pro-Tempore Presidency of the upper-chamber. Argentine political tradition instructed that the party in charge of the presidency appointed the President Pro-Tempore of the Senate, independently of the chamber's partisan composition. So had it been with Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) and also with De la Rúa up to that moment, even when both were radicals and the Senate majority was consistently held by the Peronists. This time, however, opportunity would prevail over tradition. Given the vice-presidential vacancy, the Peronist strategy meant that the nominee would be the first in line for the presidential succession. Should De la Rúa travel abroad, get sick, or be unable to continue his term for whatever reasons, an opposition leader would take his place. Such a "cohabitation" practice was unheard of in a presidential regime like the Argentine one. But, as it turned out, it was not cohabitation what the PJ leaders had in mind when they appointed Ramón Puerta, a former governor of the middle-sized province of Misiones, as new president of the Senate. Puerta took office in the first days of December, when the newly elected legislators did. By that time, everything had started to fall apart.

On November 30, 1 billion pesos had been withdrawn from the banking system. To stave off a run on the banks and prevent complete collapse, De la Rúa declared banking restrictions effective December 3 in the form of a partial freeze (*corralito*). This measure eventually ended the currency board system (*convertibilidad*) that De la Rúa's economy minister himself, Cavallo, had put into place a decade before. As a result of the freezing, savers were unable to withdraw their money from bank deposits. Although these measures were aimed at controlling the banking crisis for a period of just 90 days, few believed this would be the case. On the contrary, most expected that the national currency would not be pegged to the dollar any longer, what raised deep uncertainty regarding financial stability and property rights.

The enforcement of the new measures caused delays and problems for the general population. Massive queues at banks and ATMs and growing reports of an imminent political crisis contributed to inflame Argentina's political scenario. In this context, diverse factions of the opposition, as well as interest groups who wanted a devaluation of the Argentine peso, seized the opportunity to fuel public anger. State

unions, traditionally linked to the Peronist party, fostered strikes among the workers in some ministries and virtually closed key public offices in demand for a policy reversal and the resignation of Cavallo. The administration failed to take action aimed at restoring the normal functioning of the public services, what led opposition leaders to believe that this pattern would lead, sooner or later, to the fall of the government – no matter what the opposition did.<sup>6</sup>

On December 7, an analyst reported that “the PJ made yesterday the decision to stop the offensive that many internal sectors were pushing for and that aimed at accelerating – by action or inaction – Fernando de la Rúa’s time”.<sup>7</sup> The PJ leaders estimated that the President might not be able to complete his tenure, but they did not want to appear as his hangmen. Moreover, most Peronists did not believe they were yet ready to get back to power. Several economists were predicting the end of the *Convertibilidad* and the inevitability of currency devaluation, so common sense indicated that it was better for the opposition that the costs were paid by the ruling coalition. Hence, the PJ parliamentary leaders decided not to modify the vacancy law (*ley de acefalía*), as such move would have been interpreted as an outright decision to go for the president.

On December 12 the Deputy Minister of Justice, Melchor Cruchaga, summoned his cabinet of advisors. This was supposed to be a regular meeting, as these gatherings were convened every Wednesday at lunch time. This time, however, there would be an extraordinary participant: the main advisor to the Minister. The meeting started with one of the Deputy’s advisors performing an in-depth analysis of the political situation; his conclusion was that the government would not be able to survive past March. Surprisingly, the Minister’s advisor agreed with the analysis and added information and comparative experience that supported it. The relevance of this event is underscored by the fact that the Minister of Justice was Jorge de la Rúa, the President’s brother and one of his closest aides. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the President was informed about this warnings, which were also being issued in other governmental offices – among which the State Information Secretary (SIDE). However, according to De la Rúa’s behavior along the following week, he seemed not to have taken notice of the forecasts that flooded his administration. Other top officials, including one minister

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<sup>6</sup> Personal testimony from a Peronist cadre and high public officer of Buenos Aires province.

<sup>7</sup> Mariano Pérez de Eulate, “El peronismo, con imagen de cautela y en medio de sus propios dilemas”, *Clarín*, 07/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/07/p-325800.htm>)



and one key ambassador, confirmed to the author that the President did not appear to pay any attention when they warned him about imminent risks. He only reacted to soft talk regarding his soccer team and the internal struggles of the UCR in his district, the Federal Capital.

During almost three weeks after the imposition of the *corralito*, scattered crowds of unemployed workers and suburban dwellers took to the streets. The first serious riots took place in various cities of the central provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Ríos: Rosario (starting on December 14), Concordia, Concepción del Uruguay and Gualaguaychú.<sup>8</sup> Between December 16 and 19, incidents involving unemployed activists and suburban dwellers spread all over the country. They demanded the handing-out of food bags from supermarkets, ending up with outright looting of small and medium-size food stores on December 18 in Greater Buenos Aires. Since the previous Radical administration of Raúl Alfonsín had been forced to resign after a wave of lootings in 1989, these events could hardly be minimized by political actors.

Although the fragility of the administration was evident to most observers, very few expected an immediate outcome. On December 18, the Peronists passed a proposal through the House's Committee of Constitutional Affairs authorizing Congress not to go into recess during summer. In this way, they would keep control upon the legislative agenda instead of yielding it to the President. Clearly, they were challenging an adversary thought to be in place until March 1, when congressional recess would end. The government reaction also manifested an expectation of stability: whereas some officials proposed to veto all bills passed by Congress in the coming months, others considered that the legislative decision was unconstitutional and would therefore be rebuffed by the Supreme Court.<sup>9</sup> A further sign of the widespread unawareness regarding what was about to happen was provided by daily newspapers: Clarín, for instance, informed about these skirmishes not in the politics section but in the economy one. De la Rúa publicly denied any similarity between the ongoing lootings and those that preceded Alfonsín's early resignation, and downplayed the difficulties by recognizing that "there is a problem, but there is no reason for alarm or for speaking of a

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<sup>8</sup> Javier Auyero (2006) and Verónica Toller, "En Entre Ríos se prendió la mecha", *Clarín*, 19/05/2002, (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2002/05/19/p-389512.htm>).

<sup>9</sup> Armando Vidal, "El PJ dio otro paso para extender las ordinarias y desafía al Gobierno", *Clarín*, 19/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/19/e-00601.htm>).

generalized conflict”.<sup>10</sup> This is the obvious declaration that anyone in his situation should issue; however, all contacted sources confirmed that this is what the President really thought.

Arguably, the political collapse was mainly a consequence of structural factors related to the economy. However, this does neither explain the erratic management nor the political consequences of the crisis. Although the PJ decided not to push De la Rúa out of power, they got prepared for such a possibility by appointing one of theirs first in the line of succession. In turn, De la Rúa did not leave office voluntarily but his behavior showed that he would not take any measures to face the raising threats or control their damages. The economic crisis may have been unavoidable, but its political spillover was not. Peronist readiness for power, combined with Radical neglect of warnings, set the stage for the emergence of an unexpected political actor: the people on the streets.

### **The rebellion: spontaneous or orchestrated?**

The bitterest period of the political crisis unfolded in the less than two weeks that run from December 19 to December 30. It was framed by two peaks: the first, on December 19-20, set off the turmoil, flooded the streets with people and brought De la Rúa down; the second, on December 28-29, provoked the downfall of De la Rúa’s successor, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá. Although public manifestations such as neighbors’ assemblies and road blockades (“*piquetes*”) went on during the following months, they were reoriented towards particular rather than global targets. Banks and individual politicians became the object of popular wrath, therefore deflecting the pressure against government buildings and policies that characterized the turbulent days following December 19. Prior to this date, though, angry mobs had already stormed supermarkets and small stores in Entre Ríos, Greater Buenos Aires, Rosario and other major cities. This had been the spark that lit the fire. Yet, more relevant than the spark was that, when the expected fireman, i.e. president De la Rúa, appeared on the scene, he seemed to be pouring gasoline rather than water.

In the morning of December 19, De la Rúa attended a meeting with businessmen and labor unionists organized by Caritas Argentina. Not only was him insulted and booed by passing citizens as he entered and left the gathering, but he was also strongly

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<sup>10</sup> Lucio Fernández Moores, “Para frenar los saqueos, el Gobierno reparte comida”, *Clarín*, 19/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/19/p-01801.htm>).

criticized by the participants within the meeting.<sup>11</sup> By that time, almost every relevant political actor – including the President’s party – were demanding the resignation of Cavallo. De la Rúa seemed to be aware that his own fate was tied to his minister’s, but he still thought that both would be able to hold on and overcome the political disturbances. His mood worsened as the day passed and the lootings gained in violence and spread.

Earlier in the morning in which, through Caritas, the Catholic Church attempted a desperate mediation between the government and the main sectoral representatives, a series of looting and riots had ravaged several municipalities in Greater Buenos Aires. Predominantly working-class and politically Peronist, most of these districts were ruled by PJ mayors who had large clientelistic networks fed by public funds and activated through party machines. Some of these mayors, such as Moreno’s Mariano West, ostensibly led columns of protesters and some of his lieutenants organized attacks on food stores (Auyero 2006: 20). Although other mayors did not personally show up, many of them sent municipal forces to the field with the intention not to avoid the lootings but to minimize any unnecessary violence that they might entail. Remarkably, the Buenos Aires Provincial Police (“*la bonaerense*”, which ultimately answered to Governor Carlos Ruckauf, a top Peronist) performed a similar role.<sup>12</sup> No conclusive evidence has been provided that the Police central headquarters authorized “liberated zones” (*zonas liberadas*), thus allowing dwellers to sack small and medium-size stores while protecting the larger ones. However, it has been documented that, in some localities, police agents did not only allow dwellers to sack but even participated in the lootings (Auyero 2006). Although some aides to De la Rúa denounced this fact, high officers of the Buenos Aires province (including police authorities) denied the accusation. In their view, the police forces were simply outnumbered by the crowds and the only thing they could do was to limit the damages.<sup>13</sup> They also pointed out that the

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<sup>11</sup> Ernesto Semán, “Tras el estado de sitio y los saqueos, se va Cavallo y ahora negocian con el PJ”, *Clarín*, 20/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/20/p-00215.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Amato and Lucas Guagnini, “La trama política de los saqueos de diciembre”, *Clarín*, 19/05/2002 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2002/05/19/p-389500.htm>); Alberto Amato, Lucas Guagnini and Gerardo Young, “De la Rúa: historia íntima del derrumbe de un presidente”, *Clarín*, 19/12/2002 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2002/12/19/l-491145.htm>). As Auyero (2006: 1) points out, these events highlight an understudied “grey zone,” i.e. “the obscure (and obscured) links that looters maintain with established power-holders.”

<sup>13</sup> Gerardo Young, Lucas Guagnini and Alberto Amato, “La Bonaerense y sus dos caras durante los saqueos”, *Clarín*, 20/05/2002 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2002/05/20/p-389623.htm>); Alberto Amato,

lootings in Greater Buenos Aires were no lesser than those occurred in the Federal Capital, jurisdiction of the Federal Police –which depended on the national government and, therefore, could not be blamed for being puppeteered by the Peronist opposition. This was not accurate though: the protests that took place with epicenter at Plaza de Mayo, just off the federal government house, had been violently repressed by the security forces. As would become clear later, however, this was not due to the national administration efficiency to keep order but to the action of some Federal Police elements that had a different agenda from the government.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Police took varied approaches in different locations of the Federal Capital. In the popular neighborhood of Constitución, they repelled two attacks on a supermarket with rubber bullets and tear gas; in other places, in contrast, they showed up but did not repress. Their orders were to “take care that the lootings were smooth, that is, to prevent personal and material damages”.<sup>15</sup>

With violence mounting across Argentina’s major cities, De la Rúa began to consider alternative measures to restore order. The first option considered was to deploy the military to contain the violence. However, the legislation forbade military intervention in domestic security matters unless the security forces were overwhelmed; moreover, the military were unwilling to take the blame if violence got worse. With military intervention no longer an option, De la Rúa bowed to some of his advisors’ suggestion and resorted to declaring a state of siege, deploying the Federal Police, the National Gendarmerie (border guard) and the Naval Prefecture (coast guard) to contain the growing violence.

Although this measure had been requested by some governors and was afterwards officially supported by the PJ, it was the President alone who carried the burden of communicating it to the public. And he did it in the worst possible way. The message De la Rúa broadcast to inform of his decision and to issue a call for peace

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“No existió ni inacción, ni pasividad, ni desidia policial”, *Clarín*, 20/05/2002 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2002/05/20/p-389625.htm>).

<sup>14</sup> One of De la Rúa’s closest aides, who afterwards represented him in the case he faced for alleged misuse of legal force, reported to the author that the evidence regarding four of the protesters who were killed by the police pointed to *fusilamientos policiales* (police shooting executions) rather than involuntary casualties. In brief, the victims were shot lead bullets from short distances by police agents. Some former government officers still claim, off the record, that the deaths were provoked not by Federal Police agents but by covert elements of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police in an attempt to destabilize De la Rúa.

<sup>15</sup> “Las calles porteñas, invadidas por el desborde popular”, *La Nación*, 20/12/2001 ([www.lanacion.com.ar/360733](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/360733)).

produced an effect opposite to expected: instead of pacifying an irritated citizenry, it was considered a provocation. De la Rúa looked distant and insensitive to what was taking place. Some of his aides even qualified his speech as “autistic”.<sup>16</sup> As the consequent reactions showed, many people perceived that the seriousness of the situation had not been caught by the administration. Consequently, they decided to take action in order to make their voice heard.

Following the broadcast, spontaneous *cacerolazos* (pot-banging manifestations) started to take place in diverse locations of Buenos Aires, signaling the middle-class’s unrest. This type of protest had been practiced in the last years of the Menem administration, but only through windows and balconies. This time it was different. In the evening, when the summer sun was still visible, groups of people from middle-class quarters of Buenos Aires went out to the streets banging on pots and pans, stridently rejecting the president’s request for moderation. There was no single starting point: the protest initiated more or less at the same time in scattered neighborhoods, and only afterwards did the media started to report these spontaneous occurrences. Key street-crossings were rapidly populated by noisy crowds, and gradually these groups started to move towards the Plaza de Mayo. There was neither previous organization nor in-time coordination, except by e-mails that were circulating all over the city and country (SMSs were not yet available in Argentina). Radio and TV forecasts trailed much after the events.

By dinner time, all major avenues that led to the city center were packed by marching multitudes. They reached Plaza de Mayo shouting what would become the grievance’s brand: “*que se vayan todos*” (“all of them must go”). Cavallo was no longer the main target of popular anger: De la Rúa’s unfortunate speech had transformed latent resentments into open, all-out contestation. What had began as rioting by unemployed and leftist-leaning groups turned into a middle-class protest, which was oriented towards the political authorities rather than against neighborhood stores. To be sure, the *cacerolazos* were a more peaceful form of protest than the *saqueos* (lootings); but peace would not last. Further incidents between police forces and protesters continued to take place long after midnight, provoking seventeen dead all throughout the country – of

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<sup>16</sup> Atilio Blea and Mariano Thieberger “La renuncia del Presidente: el último día de De la Rúa en la casa de gobierno”, *Clarín*, 21/12/2001, ([www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/21/p-00401.htm](http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/21/p-00401.htm)).

which five in Plaza de Mayo.<sup>17</sup> The government was caught by surprise by the revolt of Buenos Aires' middle-classes, which had historically been the staunchest supporters of De la Rúa. Overwhelmed by the events, the president decided to loose hand to the economy minister only after his aides convinced him that his permanence would weaken, not strengthen, whatever negotiating capacity the government might still have.<sup>18</sup> December 19 concluded with the resignation of Cavallo, but this gesture soon proved to be insufficient.

The protests went on the following day. Although the administration had agreed with the military their participation in an emergency handing-out of food, the plan failed due to lack of coordination between different federal offices. Throughout the morning of December 20, groups of protesters converged on Plaza de Mayo despite the state of siege. The Federal Police, acting under orders from the government, tried to control the protests. An attempt by a federal judge to halt police operations was disregarded, and the situation worsened as new groups of protesters continued to arrive. As violence expanded, government authorities discussed the possibility to impose censorship on all news outlets from Buenos Aires. The rationale behind the proposal was that the protests were being fuelled by a contagion effect. The intention was to use the state of siege to force the television networks to stop transmitting current events and broadcast instead emergency programming. This plan never saw the light because inner disagreements aborted its implementation. With his options steadily being reduced, De la Rúa went into national television at 4 P.M. to offer the Peronists to negotiate a “government of national unity” and try to bring some peace to the country. Some of his ministers, who watched the discourse on TV, depressingly commented to the author that the president was too far from understanding what was really happening “out there”.

At the time of the speech, a caucus of Peronist governors was taking place at a country villa in the province of San Luis, but press reports and political rumors had it that the governors were heading towards Buenos Aires and would arrive soon. Three hours later, however, Humberto Roggero, head of the Peronist bloc of the House, announced that the PJ would not join the government. The governors had not moved

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<sup>17</sup> “Cinco muertos en los incidentes de Plaza de Mayo”, *La Nación*, 20/12/2001 (www.lanacion.com.ar/360790).

<sup>18</sup> Graciela Mochkofsky, “De la Rúa retuvo a Cavallo hasta el final”, *La Nación*, 20/12/2001, (www.lanacion.com.ar/360758).

from San Luis and Roggero was apparently speaking on their behalf. Social unrest went on in the streets, but now was clear that the administration was definitely on its own.

After knowing the Peronists' response, and as social mobilizations kept growing throughout the country, De la Rúa decided to resign from office. Just a few ministers remained at his side. The situation in the Plaza de Mayo was still too violent for him to leave by car to his official residence, thus the President's security detail decided to take him out of the Casa Rosada onboard an Air Force helicopter. The images of De la Rúa's "escape" by helicopter were broadcast and did not help to weaken public irritation.

Street violence slowly abated nonetheless. By the end of the day, the death toll amounted to 29 people.<sup>19</sup> According to foreign observers, Buenos Aires looked like Beirut. Most streets in the city downtown were blocked, half with masonry and broken glasses from the windows of surrounding stores, half with smoking tyres and furniture. Almost no commercial buildings, especially banks and food stores, had been spared. Many cars laid turned around, some still burning. Explosions were sporadically heard and half-naked, face-covered men carrying threatening sticks prowled around. The smell of burning rubber and powder filled the air. Suddenly, beautiful and cosmopolitan Buenos Aires had transformed itself into a city at war. The Capital was smoking; the country, acephalous.

The President Pro-Tempore of the Senate, Ramón Puerta, took over as Interim President until Congress could appoint a successor to De la Rúa. A presidential mandate had been terminated prior to its constitutional deadline due to popular mobilizations and political deadlock. Now the people were returning to their homes, so it was on the politicians' court to break the deadlock and restore governability. Or so they thought.

### **The way out: congressional autonomy or governors' decision?**

The literature dealing with the December 2001 events in Argentina has tended to focus on popular mobilization (Auyero 2006; Schuster et al 2002), parliamentary intervention (Mustapic 2005) or both (Hochstetler 2006). Less attention has been paid to actors other than the people in the streets or the parties in Congress. The case I make is that the December 2001 events cannot be accurately understood without reference to additional actors. These actors were rooted at the subnational level: key mayors in Greater Buenos Aires and most provincial governors had a crucial role; the former (as

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<sup>19</sup> Ernesto Semán, "Saqueos, violencia y muerte: una bienvenida tardía a América Latina", *Clarín*, 24/12/2001, ([www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/24/p-03201.htm](http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/24/p-03201.htm)).

discussed above) in triggering the crisis through fostering popular protest, the latter in manufacturing its outcome.

After De la Rúa's resignation, it took only one day for the party that held the parliamentary majority to decide who would succeed him. However, the substantive decision was not made by parliament members but by a superior conclave. The same fourteen governors that, gathered in San Luis province, had turned down De la Rúa's invitation to form a national unity government, got together in Buenos Aires to appoint one of their own as the new president. Such a decision came not without discussion though. The governors were split in two main blocs. One bloc brought together the three governors of the largest provinces: Buenos Aires's Carlos Ruckauf, Córdoba's José Manuel de la Sota and Santa Fe's Carlos Reutemann ("*los grandes*"). Despite the crisis, they enjoyed a positive public image and were the most likely candidates to run for the PJ in the next presidential elections –and being the PJ candidate certainly meant winning the election. The other bloc assembled the governors of all the other provinces, who were thus called "the small ones" (*los chicos*). Whereas the former intended to nominate a caretaker who should govern for a few months with the only mission of calling a presidential election at the soonest, the latter insisted to appoint someone to complete De la Rúa's term –and therefore stay in power for two years.

The meetings between the two groups took place at various congressional offices, the decisive summit being held in the one occupied by interim federal president Ramón Puerta. The final decision split the difference: the appointee would govern for three months and call early elections in March 2002, as the "big governors" aspired, but he would be a member of the "smalls" group: Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, governor of San Luis. Both sectors seemed satisfied with the agreement, aptly termed by the press as "project of the bigger, men of the smaller".<sup>20</sup> The Peronists' clear majority on both houses ensured that Rodríguez Saá would be elected on December 22.

The nomination of Rodríguez Saá, a traditional caudillo from a small province, was endorsed by PJ lawmakers alone in Congress. No opposition party voted for him. To broaden his base of support, the new president embarked from the first moment on ambitious projects aimed at gaining popularity. Hence, most congressmen bestowed him with a standing ovation when, in his inauguration speech, he declared the decision to default on the public debt. This decision was also received enthusiastically by a

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Eichelbaum, "Acuerdo en el PJ, a la medida de todos sus gobernadores", *Clarín*, 22/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/22/p-00401.htm>).



public opinion that got a dose of symbolic relief from such a measure, which arguably punished key responsible actors of the collapse, i.e. the foreign creditors. However, public discontent was far from over and a seemingly banal decision of Rodríguez Saá would trigger it again just a few days later.

As soon as he took office, Rodríguez Saá launched a strategy that sought to extend his mandate.<sup>21</sup> He aspired to complete De la Rúa's term instead of complying with the agreement reached at by all Peronist governors. The governors' response did not take long: one day after Rodríguez Saá's intentions made the news, on December 27, Córdoba's governor released a public declaration stating the necessity to hold elections as early as March 2002. Moreover, he reaffirmed that, "according to the agreement reached at by *the governors*" (emphasis added), the president in charge was not allowed to run for reelection.<sup>22</sup> The quarrel, however, was not to be kept isolated among governors and ex governors but would soon take to the streets.

The new president appointed to the Cabinet some figures that were highly irritating for the public opinion – especially in the Federal Capital. The most notorious of them was former mayor of Buenos Aires Carlos Grosso, arguably one of the most corrupt figures in Argentine politics. When questioned about his nomination, Grosso indelicately declared that the president had call on him "not due to my criminal record but my intelligence".<sup>23</sup> On 28 December, short of ten days after the *cacerolazo* that led to the fall of De la Rúa, the people of Buenos Aires took again their pans, went back to the streets and marched to Plaza de Mayo.

Once again, the sparks were lit by 9 PM in the central, middle-class quarters of the city. First, a few people started clapping through their windows; later, some went out to their homes' doorsteps banging pots and pans; by 10.30 PM the streets were getting crowded. Just before midnight, the multitude arrived before the house of government. The happening was completely atypical for an urban Friday evening: whole families marched through the main avenues dressing Bermuda pants and t-shirts; old ladies walked their tiny dogs while banging pans with spoons; teenagers rallied as if before a rock concert, and a never-ending chain of cars surrounded Plaza de Mayo at

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<sup>21</sup> Mariano Pérez de Eulate, "Ya hay movidas para que el Presidente siga por dos años", *Clarín*, 27/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/27/p-01601.htm>).

<sup>22</sup> Walter Curia and Mariano Pérez de Eulate, "De la Sota salió a reclamar que haya elección en marzo", *Clarín*, 28/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/28/p-02001.htm>).

<sup>23</sup> Carlos Eichelbaum, "El retorno de Grosso y el juego de contrastes en el nuevo Gobierno", *Clarín*, 26/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/26/p-331164.htm>).

walking speed, the drivers honking their claxons and waving Argentine flags. A warm summer weather contributed to a magical, extremely peaceful manifestation. The author of these lines testifies to the climate of intense empathy that overwhelmed the people reunited in the streets, by the Cathedral and the Cabildo (old city hall), quietly walking by these historical buildings as though on a Sunday walk after Church. To be sure, there were chants and songs, but the prevailing form of communication was gentle talk as people moved around. Although the whole political class was target of criticism, Grosso, and by extension Rodríguez Saá, were the most vilified.<sup>24</sup> The people expressed their exhaustion for rulers who had not been able to understand their demand for change, but they did so in a very urbane way.

Such an atmosphere lasted until 2.30AM, when most people left for their homes. However, the Plaza de Mayo did not empty; organized groups stayed and seized the opportunity to launch a violent attack against government premises.<sup>25</sup> Police repression ensued, and the events came to replicate closely what had happened on 19 December: a spontaneous and nonviolent manifestation by middle-class savers was followed by aggressive assaults by political activists and common gangs, which in turn provoked the repression of the security forces.<sup>26</sup> This time, however, the separation between the consecutive phases was clear-cut so the consequences were not suffered by innocent citizens, who were mostly sleeping when the riots unfolded. The thousands of middle-class citizens and families, who had experienced a sort of sociable get-together, learned the next morning through radio and TV that their peaceful manifestation had ended up in sheer violence.

After the confrontations that took place in Plaza de Mayo, the riots moved on a dozen blocks away to the Congress. There, some demonstrators managed to get into the building, setting furniture on fire and throwing out a few paintings and statues. The perpetrators did not go much further and damages were limited, but the images of fire in the Congress Palace were broadcast worldwide and conferred the events a more dramatic tone than they actually had.

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<sup>24</sup> “Otra vez la bronca nació en los barrio y llegó a la Plaza”, *Clarín*, 29/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/29/p-00401.htm>).

<sup>25</sup> Ernesto Semán and Atilio Bleta, “Madrugada de protesta y represión”, *Clarín*, 29/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/29/p-00501.htm>).

<sup>26</sup> Guido Braslavsky, “El poder de las cacerolas y el contraste de la agresión”, *Clarín*, 30/12/2001 (<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2001/12/30/p-01101.htm>).

The first consequence of the riots was the resignation of Carlos Grosso. However, the corollary was clear: it was the president who was definitely weakened by the protest, just a few days after a similar movement had entailed the termination of his predecessor's mandate. Aware of his vulnerability, Rodríguez Saá called for a summit of Peronist governors at the Presidential holiday retreat of Chapadmalal. He expected that, just like when he was appointed, this forum of top power-holders would back him. He was wrong: of the fourteen Peronist governors, only five attended. The congressional majority that had appointed him just a few days before failed to come in his defense, making clear that the president's fate was in the governors' hands. Rejected by the streets, and realizing that he lacked support from his own party, Rodríguez Saá returned to his home province on 30 December to announce his resignation to the Presidency after barely a week in office.

At a vertiginous speed, the situation seemed to replicate the events that had led to the resignation of De la Rúa. The pattern can be resumed as follows: popular –but not always spontaneous— manifestations lead to the ousting of a constitutional president and leave formal power in congressional hands, whereas real power rests firmly with the provincial authorities. In both cases, the governors' decision to act –or remain quiet— defined the evolution of events. They isolated De la Rúa first and Rodríguez Saá later, leaving them no serious alternative but to go. And they decided who would succeed them. Their next choice was Eduardo Duhalde, then senator, previously PJ presidential candidate (defeated in 1999 by De la Rúa) and former governor of Buenos Aires province. This time, however, the appointment was backed by the UCR and other opposition parties, and it was decided that Duhalde should serve until the 2003 presidential elections. In a completely unexpected twist of fortune, he was called to complete the term of the man who had beaten him in the 1999 presidential elections.

## **Conclusion**

Conventional accounts have it that the events of December 2001, which led to the early resignation of two constitutional presidents, were ignited by popular revolt and solved through parliamentary means. Diversely, this paper contends that a third, crucial factor was behind both the origin and outcome of the crisis: the (more or less purposeful) action of key Peronist subnational executives – i.e. mayors and governors. Henceforth, two mostly overlooked elements are brought to the fore. First, party politics: it was the Peronist leaders who prepared the stage to get back to power, not a

spontaneous mob. Second, subnational politics: the federal level of institutional decision-making is not enough to understand how the crisis unraveled and was processed, as the ultimate decisions were made at governors' summits instead of through regular congressional proceedings.

This paper was set to answer three questions. First, it reviewed the way in which the stage for the events of December 2001 was set, with a view to assessing the degree to which the main opposition party was involved. It was shown how the by-elections of October 2001 conferred the PJ a congressional majority. While it cannot be said that the PJ aimed at toppling the president, it has been shown that its leaders were aware of the fragility of the ruling coalition. Hence, they made institutional decisions that were at odds with Argentina's political traditions. Their goal was not to support the president but to secure his office should a vacancy occur.

The second question posed whether the rebellion was spontaneous or orchestrated. The answer is mixed – though tilted towards the latter. The “*argentino*”, as the street protests of December 2001 came to be called, was not a homogeneous phenomenon. It comprised “the wave of food riots that occurred alongside thousands of people blockading roads and bridges throughout the country, and the banging pots and pans in the main plaza of Buenos Aires” (Auyero 2006: 10). In and around Buenos Aires, it was a concurrent manifestation of at least three different social sectors: middle-class citizens of the Federal district, the urban poor of the metropolitan surroundings, and a number of criminal gangs made up of suburban lumpen-proletariat. The motivations and behavior of these groups were different. Middle-class protesters (*caceroleros*) objected to the bank freezing and were particularly irritated by the numb speech that President De la Rúa broadcasted in the afternoon on December 19. The urban poor (*saqueadores*) had more prosaic needs and concrete objectives: to take home as much goodies, especially but not exclusively food, as they could. The goals of the gangs do not require a long explanation; they mingled among the looters and benefited from the confusion. What the two latter groups have in common is that they were linked to or organized by local political bosses of Buenos Aires province. The spontaneity of the protests was limited to the first group, i.e. the *caceroleros*. Activists from extreme-left parties also played a role, more relevant in igniting the violence in the Federal district than in fueling the suburban disturbs. There was, all in all, a “grey zone where the deeds and networks of looters, political entrepreneurs and law enforcement officials meet and mesh” (Auyero 2006: 1; also Auyero and Moran 2005). In sum, while there

was a segment of the popular protest that was spontaneous, the more violent and consequential demonstrations were either fomented or taken advantage of by political groups.

Finally, the issue was raised as to whom were the main actors behind the scene in the resolution of the crisis. This paper has argued that, although formal institutions such as Congress played a part, the bulk of decisions were made within a more informal forum that do not belong to the federal level of authority: the summit meetings of the provincial governors.

The literature that deals with the December 2001 events is mostly split as regards its focus: it concentrates either on the causes or the resolution of the crisis. The former highlights the social mobilization in the streets that led to successive presidential resignations (Auyero 2006; Schuster et al 2002); the latter underlines the institutional procedures that allowed Congress to find a constitutional solution that were politically viable (Mustapic 2005). A few others perform broader comparative analyses of several Latin American cases, which help to locate the events described above in regional and historical context (Hochstetler 2006; Marsteintredet and Berntzen 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2003a, 2003b, 2005). I contend that most of these approaches, however insightful, tend to overlook a crucial set of actors that were neither marching in the streets nor voting in Congress. In Argentina these actors had two features: they were subnational power-holders (either governors or mayors) and they were Peronist. Their protagonism is crucial to understand how the social protest was ignited in the first place and how the crisis unfolded and was maneuvered thereafter. Furthermore, the role they played highlights key historical continuities that underlie contemporary Argentine politics, no matter how unique the events analyzed here may appear.

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