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Social Revolution or Political Takeover?

The Argentine Collapse of 2001 Reassessed

by
Andrés Malamud

In 1995 the Peronist party held the Argentine presidency, a comfortable majority in both congressional chambers, and most provincial governorships and municipalities. In 2013 the political landscape looked 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. The political collapse did not, however, constitute a spontaneous or definite rupture with the past. Instead, the social revolt detonated in December 2001 was not only temporally and territorially limited but also politically nurtured and institutionally bounded. Conventional explanations have tended to overlook a crucial set of actors that was neither marching in the streets nor voting in the Congress. These actors were subnational power holders and they were Peronist, and their participation explains how the protest began, how the crisis unfolded, and how it was resolved.

En 1995, el partido peronista ocupaba la presidencia de la Argentina y gozaba de amplia mayoría en ambas cámaras, así como en las gobernaciones y municipios. En 2013, el panorama político lucía exactamente igual. Sin embargo, entre 2001 y 2002 el país sufrió una de las crisis más graves de su historia, que desembocó en levantamientos populares masivos, la renuncia anticipada de dos presidentes y el mayor incumplimiento de pago de una deuda soberana en la historia. El colapso político, sin embargo, no constituyó una ruptura espontánea ni definitiva con el pasado sino un acontecimiento que, además de temporal y territorialmente acotado, fue alimentado políticamente y digerido institucionalmente. Las explicaciones convencionales han pasado por alto a un conjunto de actores que no marchaba en las calles ni votaba en el Congreso. Estos actores tenían dos características: eran autoridades subnacionales y eran peronistas. Su participación explica el inicio de la protesta social, el desarrollo de la crisis y su resolución.

Keywords: *Argentine crisis, Political instability, Social revolt, Popular mobilization, Subnational politics, Peronism*

In 1995 Argentina's Peronist Justicialist Party held the presidency, a comfortable majority in both congressional chambers, and most provincial governorships

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and municipalities. In 2013 the political landscape looked 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 (Tedesco, 2003). This article questions the widespread view that the collapse constituted a significant rupture with the past (an exception to this rule is Levitsky and Murillo, 2003). Instead, it argues that the social revolt detonated in December 2001 was not only temporally and territorially bounded but also nurtured, controlled, and taken advantage of by traditional actors.

The literature on the events can be divided according to its focus: studies concentrate either on the causes or on the resolution of the crisis. The former highlight the street mobilization that led to successive presidential resignations (Auyero, 2006; Schuster et al., 2002); the latter underline the institutional procedures that allowed the Congress to find a politically viable constitutional solution to the crisis (Mustapic, 2005). A few engage in broader comparative analyses of several Latin American cases, placing the Argentine events in a regional and historical context (Hochstetler, 2006; Marsteintredet and Berntzen, 2008; Pérez-Liñán, 2003; 2005). Most of these approaches tend to overlook a crucial set of actors that was neither marching in the streets nor voting in the Congress. These actors were subnational power holders and they were Peronist, and their participation explains how the protest began, how the crisis unfolded, and how it was resolved.

The article is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief introduction to Argentine politics. In each of the following three sections, I pose a dichotomous question to which I provide an empirically grounded response. In the first, I explore the causes of the collapse and ask whether it could have been prevented. In the second, I recount the process of popular rebellion and examine the degree to which it was spontaneous as opposed to organized. In the third, I analyze the aftermath and assess whether the Congress or the governors mattered most. The fourth summarizes the argument.

I use two main sources: a systematic survey of newspaper accounts and a set of direct interviews conducted with key actors from both the ruling coalition and the opposition. All 2001 and 2002 issues of the two leading national newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, were reviewed. The former should be credited with having carried out in-depth journalistic investigations five months and one year after the events, respectively. The use of press accounts facilitates the establishment of a chronology and provides a better grasp of the protagonists' views at the time of the events. As to the interviews, between January and December 2001 I served as adviser to the deputy minister of justice, Melchor Cruchaga (the minister of justice incidentally being Jorge de la Rúa, a prestigious lawyer who happened to be the brother of the president). This circumstance gave me access to sources that would have otherwise been inaccessible.

AN OVERVIEW OF ARGENTINE POLITICS

In 1983 Argentina inaugurated a democratic regime that would become its longest-lasting since 1930. However, novelty was accompanied by legacy: the same two parties that had dominated Argentine politics for most of the twentieth century—the Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union—UCR or Radicals)

and the Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party—PJ or Peronists)—won all the elections from October 1983 on. Between 1983 and 2001, the PJ governed for 10 years while the UCR, alone or in coalition,¹ ruled for about 8 (Malamud, 2004). Despite their fairly balanced electoral achievements, their government performances differed significantly: while the PJ was able to complete its two terms (1989–1995 and 1995–1999), the UCR failed to complete either of its two (1983–1989 and 1999–2003). Street protests played a key role in both instances.² Because of this, Calvo and Murillo (2005: 226) speak of the “new iron law of Argentine politics” whereby “non-Peronists are able to win presidential elections but are unable to govern until the end of their terms in office.”

In the economic sphere, the turning point occurred in 1991. Up until then, economic instability had led to a relative decline vis-à-vis both the developed and the developing world (Gerchunoff and Llach, 2003). But then President Carlos Menem (PJ) embarked on an ambitious process of state reform, hoping to promote stability and growth through massive privatization, economic deregulation, and opening to world markets. Initially, his policies were remarkably successful, leading most observers to believe that Argentina had finally overcome its “boom-bust” past and was on its way to joining the ranks of developed countries. In this article I analyze the events that proved this belief to be a delusion. Before doing so, however, it is appropriate to provide some context.

The Argentine Constitution establishes a federal system and presidential government. The federal system’s component subnational units—the provinces—have autonomy to choose their own rulers and pass their own legislation, albeit subordinated to the federal legal framework. Presidentialism implies that the chief executive is elected for a fixed term, and thus its duration in office is independent of both the Congress and the electorate.

Federalism is a power-sharing arrangement that grants governors considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the national authorities. In Argentina, governors have traditionally controlled electoral politics in their provinces, including party machines and electoral nominations. They exert a strong influence over political recruitment and career paths even when their protégés are federal legislators because the latter’s ability to run for reelection depends not on their performance but on the will of their provincial bosses (Botana, 1977; Calvo et al., 2001).

Conventionally, Argentine presidentialism has been seen to confer significant power on the chief executive to the detriment of the legislative branch. Because of the alleged presidential dominance over the Congress, the system has been called “hyperpresidentialist” (Nino, 1992; see also Jones, 1997; Ferreira Rubio and Goretti, 1998). In recent years, however, even before the 2001 collapse, a growing literature has questioned this view. New studies argue that congressional proceedings have effectively checked the executive branch on some crucial issues and forced it to negotiate (Etchemendy and Palermo, 1998; Llanos, 2002). In short, between 1983 and 2001 there was a Congress capable of limiting executive power, even though its members responded not to a popular constituency but to the will of their provincial bosses. This meant that the 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 room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis

the provinces as the latter do vis-à-vis the federal government, they do possess political autonomy and budgetary resources. In areas of great demographic concentration like Greater Buenos Aires,³ mayors have been able to control and mobilize large numbers of people who mostly depend on clientelism and public handouts for subsistence (Auyero, 1997). Remarkably, most of the departments of Greater Buenos Aires have been consistently ruled by Peronist bosses.

THE COLLAPSE: AGENCY OR DESTINY?

The path that leads to disaster is usually easy to identify—in hindsight. In this case, there was a succession of signs that led some observers to forecast the storm from the day the first clouds appeared on the horizon, on October 6, 2000, when Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez resigned from the vice presidency of the republic and ignited a major crisis in the ruling coalition, the Alianza.

The Alianza had come to power in December 1999 after more than 10 years of Peronist rule under Menem, whose neoliberal policies and alleged corruption had contributed to galvanizing the opposition. The Alianza, a loose coalition between Fernando de la Rúa’s UCR and Álvarez’s Frente para un País Solidario (Front for a Solidary Nation—FREPASO), campaigned on two issues: maintaining the exchange peg and combating corruption. De la Rúa was a traditional politician known for his moderation; Álvarez was younger and more combative but regarded nonetheless as more pragmatic than radical. Despite hopes for peaceful cohabitation, problems began to emerge soon after the inauguration. Álvarez resigned 10 months after taking office following allegations that the administration had surrendered to corruption. Meanwhile, economic stagnation added fuel to growing public dissatisfaction.

Rather than rebuilding the coalition, de la Rúa initially tried to weather the crisis and insulate his adjustment policies by surrounding himself with loyal ministers and cutting ad hoc deals with the provincial and congressional opposition. When the economic situation deteriorated further, he reshuffled his cabinet and appointed his former presidential rival, Domingo Cavallo, as economy minister in March 2001. Cavallo had been the star minister in Menem’s cabinet, and although he had left the administration in 1996 following bitter disagreements he was still associated with the policies of the 1990s. His comeback alienated many supporters of the administration.

Cavallo’s appointment failed to have the intended impact on the economy: the country’s risk index continued to rise, and bank deposits decreased rapidly, expressing declining levels of trust in financial and monetary stability. The midterm elections of October 14 sentenced the administration to failure in advance. The significant level of abstention and the large number of self-spoiled votes (*voto bronca*) were widely interpreted as a sign of dissatisfaction with the political system; more concretely, the result was that the Alianza lost control of the Congress to the Peronists. According to public opinion surveys, popular discontent was widespread, although its effects were unevenly distributed across party lines. FREPASO virtually disappeared, the UCR held out only in a few provincial strongholds, and the rising PJ was processing an internal struggle for leadership fed by the victories of most provincial bosses in their districts.

A few weeks after the October midterm elections, there were signs that the PJ was preparing, if not pushing, for an early termination of the presidential term. By the end of November, it became known that its parliamentary group in the Senate had decided to nominate a candidate for the presidency pro tempore of the upper chamber. Traditionally, the party in control of the presidency appoints this official independently of the chamber's partisan composition. This had been the case under Alfonsín (1983–1989) and with de la Rúa up until then, even though both were Radicals and the Senate majority was consistently held by the Peronists. This time, however, opportunity trumped tradition. The Peronists knew that, since the vice presidency was vacant, their nominee would be the first in line for the presidential succession. Should de la Rúa travel abroad, become ill, or otherwise be unable to continue his term, an opposition leader would take his place. This kind of “cohabitation” was unheard of in a presidential regime. As it turned out, it was not cohabitation but succession that the PJ leaders had in mind when they appointed Ramón Puerta, a former governor, to the presidency of the Senate.

Puerta took office in early December along with the newly elected legislators. By then, everything had started to fall apart. By 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 instituted banking restrictions on December 3 in the form of a partial freeze (*corralito*). This measure led to the demise of the currency board system (*convertibilidad*) that de la Rúa's economy minister, Cavallo, had put in place a decade earlier. As a result of the freeze, savers were unable to withdraw money from their bank deposits. Although these measures aimed to control the banking crisis for a period of just 90 days, few believed that the freeze would be temporary. On the contrary, most expected that the national currency would no longer be pegged to the dollar, and this raised uncertainties about financial stability and property rights.

The enforcement of the measures caused delays and problems for the general public. Massive queues at banks and ATMs and growing reports of an imminent political crisis helped to inflame the political scenario. In this context, various opposition factions and interest groups that wanted the Argentine peso devalued seized the opportunity to fuel public anger. Labor unions, traditionally linked to Peronism, fostered strikes among workers in some ministries and virtually closed key public offices, demanding a policy reversal and Cavallo's resignation. The administration failed to take action to restore routine public services, which led opposition leaders to believe that it was only a matter of time before the government fell, regardless of what the opposition did (GSS, a Peronist cadre and high official of Buenos Aires province, interview).

On December 7 a pundit reported that “yesterday the PJ took the decision to stop the offensive that many internal sectors were pushing for and that aimed to accelerate—by action or inaction—de la Rúa's demise” (Pérez de Eulate, 2001a). PJ leaders were well aware that the president might fail to complete his term, but they did not want to appear as his executioners. Moreover, most Peronists did not consider themselves ready to return to power. Several economists were predicting the end of *convertibilidad* and the inevitability of currency devaluation, so common sense suggested that it was better for the opposition to allow the ruling coalition to pay the price. Henceforth, the PJ leaders in the Congress decided not to modify the vacancy law (*ley de acefalía*),

which some had advocated as a way to call for immediate elections should the president resign. Instead, the status quo offered them the possibility of appointing a caretaker for the remaining two years and avoiding an anticipated election that caught them ill-prepared.

On December 12 the deputy minister of justice summoned his cabinet of advisers. This was supposed to be a regular meeting, as these gatherings were convened weekly, but there was an extraordinary participant: the main adviser to the minister. The meeting started with one of the deputy's advisers performing an analysis of the political situation and concluding that the government would not survive past March. Surprisingly, the minister's adviser agreed and added information that supported the analysis. Given the proximity of the source to the president, it seems reasonable to conclude that de la Rúa was informed about these warnings, which were also being issued in other governmental offices, among them the State Information Secretariat (LT, intelligence analyst at the secretariat, interview). In the week that followed, however, de la Rúa's behavior did not betray any awareness of the dire forecasts flooding through his administration. Other top officials, including a minister and an ambassador close to de la Rúa, confirmed to me that the president appeared not to be paying any attention when warned about the imminent risks.

In the three weeks after the freeze, 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 Gualeguaychú (Auyero, 2006; Toller, 2002). Between December 16 and December 19, incidents involving unemployed activists and suburban dwellers spread all over the country. Protests demanding food handouts from supermarkets ended up in the looting of small and medium-sized food stores in Greater Buenos Aires on December 18. Since the previous Radical administration of Alfonsín had been forced to resign after a wave of lootings in 1989, political actors could hardly overlook the significance of these events.

Although the fragility of the administration was evident to most observers, very few expected an immediate dénouement. On December 18 the Peronists passed a proposal through the Congressional Committee of Constitutional Affairs authorizing the Congress not to go into recess during the summer. In this way they hoped to control the legislative agenda rather than allowing the president to do so. Clearly, they were challenging an adversary they believed would be in office until March 1, when the congressional recess ended. The government reaction also revealed an expectation of stability: some officials responded by proposing that all bills passed by the Congress in the months ahead should be vetoed (Vidal, 2001). The press also showed few signs of understanding the true impact of events: *Clarín*, for instance, reported on the skirmishes in the economic rather than the political section of its pages. The president denied any similarity between the looting and what had preceded Alfonsín's early resignation and played down the difficulties by arguing that "there is a problem, but there is no reason for alarm or for speaking of a generalized conflict" (Fernández Moores, 2001). Although any leader in his position would say this, in this case all the sources contacted confirm that this is what the president really thought.

Arguably, the political collapse was mainly a consequence of structural economic factors, but this explains neither the erratic management nor the political consequences of the crisis (cf. Bonvecchi, 2006). Although the PJ decided not to drive de la Rúa out of power, it prepared for the possibility by appointing one of its own to be first in the line of succession. In turn, de la Rúa did not leave office voluntarily, but he seemed unable or unwilling to adopt measures to face the threat and limit the damage. 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 between December 19 and December 30. It was framed by high points in tension. The first, on December 19–20, set off the civil disturbances in the streets that brought de la Rúa down. The second, on December 28–29, provoked the downfall of his successor, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá. Although public demonstrations such as neighborhood assemblies and road blockades (*piquetes*) continued in the months that followed, in contrast with the earlier protests they targeted specific rather than general issues. Banks and individual politicians became the object of popular wrath, and in contrast to the turbulent days immediately following December 19, government buildings and policies were no longer primary targets. To be sure, there had been angry mobs before December 19 that had stormed supermarkets and small stores in Entre Ríos, Greater Buenos Aires, Rosario, and other major cities. Indeed, this was the spark that lit the fire. But more consequential than the spark was that when “the fireman,” President de la Rúa, appeared on the scene he poured gasoline rather than water on the fire.

In the morning of December 19, de la Rúa attended a meeting with businessmen and labor unionists organized by Caritas Argentina. Not only was he insulted and booed by passing citizens as he entered and left the gathering but also he was strongly criticized by the participants in the meeting (Semán, 2001a). By that time, almost every relevant political actor—including the president’s party—was demanding Cavallo’s resignation. De la Rúa seemed to be aware that his own fate was tied to that of his minister, but he still thought that they could weather the storm. His mood worsened as the day passed and the looting became increasingly widespread and violent.

Earlier in the morning, 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 with large clientelistic party machine networks fed by public funds. Some of these mayors were involved in the protests. Moreno’s Mariano West, for instance, led columns of protesters while some of his lieutenants organized attacks on food stores (Auyero, 2006: 20). Although other mayors did not personally lead protests, many sent out municipal forces not to prevent looting but to minimize the collateral damage. Remarkably, the Buenos Aires Provincial Police (under the authority of Peronist

Governor Carlos Ruckauf) performed a similar role (Amato and Guagnini, 2002; Amato, Guagnini, and Young, 2002).⁴ There is no conclusive evidence that the police headquarters authorized “liberated zones” and allowed people to ransack small and medium-sized stores while protecting the larger ones, but it has been documented that in some localities police agents not only allowed protesters to loot but even participated in the looting. As one observer put it, there was a “grey zone in which the deeds and networks of looters, political entrepreneurs, and law enforcement officials meet and mesh” (Auyero, 2006: 1). Some of de la Rúa’s aides denounced this fact, but top police and civil officials in the province of Buenos Aires denied the charge. In their view, the police were simply outnumbered by protesters and damage limitation was all they could reasonably be expected to do (Amato, 2002; Young, Guagnini, and Amato, 2002). The looting in the capital was used as an example by the Peronists to argue that they were not encouraging or consenting to it through deliberate police inaction in their jurisdictions, since the police forces here depended on the Radical national government.

But this was not accurate: the protests at the epicenter, in the Plaza de Mayo right next to the federal government house, had been violently repressed by the security forces. However, as became clear later, this was less because of any efficiency on the part of the administration than because of the action of some elements of the Federal Police, which had a different agenda from the government’s.⁵ In fact, police reactions varied within the capital. In the popular neighborhood of Constitución, they repelled two attacks on a supermarket with rubber bullets and tear gas; elsewhere, they showed up but did not repress protesters. Their orders were to “ensure that the lootings are smooth, specifically, to prevent personal and material damages” (*La Nación*, 2001a).

As violence mounted across Argentina’s major cities, de la Rúa began to contemplate alternative measures for restoring order. The first option was to deploy the military to contain the violence. However, the law forbids the military from intervening in internal security unless the police are overwhelmed, and the military were unwilling to take the blame if the violence worsened. With military intervention ruled out, de la Rúa bowed to the proposal of some of his advisers and declared a state of siege, deploying the Federal Police, the National Gendarmerie (border guards), and the Naval Prefecture (the Coast Guard) to contain the violence.

Although some governors had called for this measure and the PJ had supported it officially, the president alone carried the burden of communicating it to the public, and he did so in the worst possible way. De la Rúa’s broadcast announcing the state of siege and calling for peace produced an effect opposite to that intended: instead of pacifying an irritated citizenry, it was seen as a provocation. De la Rúa looked distant and insensitive to what was taking place. Some of his aides called his speech “autistic” (Bleta and Thieberger, 2001). As the ensuing reactions showed, many people felt that the administration had failed to gauge the seriousness of the situation, and many of them decided to take action to make their voices heard.

Spontaneous *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests) started to take place in various places throughout Buenos Aires after the broadcast, signaling middle-class unrest. This type of protest had emerged in the last years of the Menem

administration, but this time the irritated citizens did not limit themselves to making noise near windows or on balconies. Instead, people from middle-class quarters of Buenos Aires went out into the streets in the early evening, the summer sun still visible, banging on pots and pans, stridently rejecting the president's request for moderation. There was no single starting point: the protest began more or less simultaneously in different neighborhoods, and it was only afterward that the media began to report on these spontaneous occurrences. Key street crossings were rapidly filled by noisy crowds, and gradually they began to make their way to the Plaza de Mayo. There was no prior organization or on-site coordination, but phone calls and e-mails circulated all over the city. The radio and television lagged behind the events.

By dinnertime, all the major avenues leading to the city center were packed with marching multitudes. They reached the Plaza de Mayo shouting what became the slogan of their grievances: "All of them out!" (*¡Que se vayan todos!*). Cavallo was no longer the main target of popular anger: de la Rúa's unfortunate speech had transformed latent resentment into open, all-out contestation. What had begun as rioting by unemployed and left-leaning groups and the looting of local stores had turned into a middle-class protest against the political authorities. To be sure, the cacerolazo was a more peaceful form of protest than the looting, but peace did not last. Further incidents between police forces and protesters occurred well after midnight, provoking 17 deaths throughout the country (*La Nación*, 2001b). The government was caught by surprise by the revolt of Buenos Aires's middle classes, once de la Rúa's staunchest supporters. Overwhelmed by events, the president decided to let the economy minister go after his aides persuaded him that keeping him on would weaken rather than strengthen what little was left of the government's negotiating capacity (Mochkofsky, 2001). Cavallo resigned on December 19, but the gesture soon proved to be insufficient.

The protests continued the following day. Although the administration had agreed that the armed forces would help to distribute emergency food handouts, the plan failed because of lack of coordination between different federal offices. Throughout the morning of December 20, groups of protesters converged on the Plaza de Mayo despite the state of siege. The Federal Police, acting on government orders, tried to control the protests. An attempt by a federal judge to halt police operations was ignored, and the situation worsened as new groups of protesters continued to arrive. As violence spread, government authorities discussed the possibility of imposing censorship on all news outlets from Buenos Aires. The rationale was that the protests were fueled by "contagion," and the intention was to use the state of siege to force the television networks to stop transmitting current events and broadcast emergency programming instead. The plan never saw the light of day because of internal disagreements. With his options steadily being reduced, de la Rúa went on national television at four in the afternoon, offering to negotiate a "government of national unity" with the Peronists to bring some peace to the country. Some of his ministers who watched the speech on TV commented that the president was 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

pundits had it that the governors were heading toward 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 from San Luis, and Roggero was apparently speaking on their behalf. There was renewed social unrest on the streets, only this time it was clear that the administration was on its own.

De la Rúa decided to resign from office after hearing the Peronist response to his call and as social mobilizations mounted throughout the country. Only a few ministers remained at his side. The situation in the Plaza de Mayo was still too violent for the president to return to the official residence by car, so his security detail opted to remove him from the Casa Rosada aboard an Air Force helicopter. The images of his “escape” by helicopter were broadcast and did not help to reduce public anger. Street violence slowly abated nonetheless. By the end of the day, the death toll stood at 29 (Semán, 2001b). Foreign observers reported that downtown Buenos Aires reminded them of Beirut. Most streets were blocked, half of them littered with masonry and broken glass from the windows of surrounding stores, others strewn with smoking tires and furniture. Almost no commercial buildings were spared. Overturned cars, some still burning, were scattered everywhere. Explosions were sporadically heard, and half-naked men prowled, wearing masks and carrying sticks threateningly. The smell of burning rubber and dust filled the air. Suddenly, beautiful cosmopolitan Buenos Aires had turned into a city at war. The capital was smoking, the country acephalous.

The president pro tempore of the Senate took over as interim president until the Congress could appoint a successor to de la Rúa. A presidential term had been terminated prior to its constitutional deadline because of popular mobilizations and political deadlock. Now the people were returning to their homes, so it was up to the politicians to break the deadlock and restore governability. Or so they thought.

THE WAY OUT: CONGRESSIONAL AUTONOMY OR GOVERNORS’ DECISION?

The literature dealing with the events of December 2001 has tended to focus on popular mobilization (Auyero, 2006; Schuster et al., 2002), congressional intervention (Mustapic, 2005), or both (Hochstetler, 2006). Less attention has been paid to actors other than the street protesters or the parties in the Congress. I argue that the events of December 2001 cannot be understood without reference to other players: key mayors in Greater Buenos Aires and provincial governors played a crucial role. The former (as discussed above) helped to trigger the crisis by fostering popular protest, and the latter contributed to manufacturing its outcome.

Just one day after de la Rúa’s resignation, the party that held the congressional majority decided who would succeed him. However, the decision was made not by members of the Congress but by a higher conclave. The same 14 governors who had turned down de la Rúa’s offer to form a national unity government while gathered in San Luis province got together in Buenos Aires

to appoint one of their own as the new president. This decision was not uncontroversial. The governors were split into two main blocs. One, the so-called *grandes*, brought together the governors of the three largest provinces: Buenos Aires's Ruckauf, Córdoba's José Manuel de la Sota, and Santa Fe's Carlos Reutemann. Despite the crisis, they had retained 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 meant winning the election. The other bloc consisted of the governors of all the other provinces, the so-called *chicos* (small ones). Whereas the former intended to nominate a caretaker who would call a presidential election as soon as possible, the latter insisted on appointing someone to complete de la Rúa's term, which is to say for another two years.

The meetings between the two blocs took place in various congressional offices and the decisive summit in the office of the interim president, Puerta. The final decision split the difference: following the preference of the "big" governors, the appointee would govern for three months and call early elections in March 2002, but the person chosen, Rodríguez Saá, governor of San Luis, was from the ranks of the "small" governors. Both sectors seemed satisfied with an agreement that the press aptly termed "the project of the bigger, the men of the smaller" (Eichelbaum, 2001a). The Peronist majority in both houses ensured that Rodríguez Saá would be elected on December 22.

The nomination of this traditional caudillo from a small province was endorsed in the Congress only by the PJ. To broaden his base of support, the new president embarked from the first moment on popular projects. He earned a standing ovation from most congressmen when he declared the decision to default on the public debt during his inaugural address. His decision was also applauded by the general public, since it promised to offer symbolic relief and to punish those perceived to be responsible for the collapse—foreign creditors. However, public discontent was still simmering, and it reemerged only days later in response to a seemingly routine decision.

As soon as the interim president took office, he sought to extend his mandate (Pérez de Eulate, 2001b), aspiring to complete de la Rúa's term rather than complying with the agreement reached by the governors. The latter did not take long to respond: a day after Rodríguez Saá's intentions made the news, on December 27, Córdoba's governor released a public declaration of the need to hold elections as early as March 2002. Moreover, he reaffirmed that, "according to the agreement reached by *the governors*" (emphasis added), the president in charge was not allowed to run for reelection (Curia and Pérez de Eulate, 2001). The quarrel soon spilled out onto the streets.

The new president appointed some individuals to his cabinet who provoked great public annoyance, particularly in the capital. Most notorious among them was the former mayor of Buenos Aires, Carlos Grosso, arguably one of the most corrupt figures in Argentine politics. When asked about his nomination, Grosso indelicately declared that the president had called on him "not because of my criminal record but because of my intelligence" (Eichelbaum, 2001b). On December 28, nearly 10 days after the cacerolazo that led to de la Rúa's downfall, the people of Buenos Aires took to the streets with their pots and pans and marched to the Plaza de Mayo again.

Once again, the protest began in the middle-class quarters of the city at nine in the evening. First, a few people began to clap next to their windows; then some went out onto their doorsteps to bang their pots and pans; by half past ten the streets were getting crowded. Just before midnight, the multitude arrived at the government house. The event was completely atypical for a Friday evening: whole families marched through the main avenues wearing Bermuda shorts and T-shirts, old ladies walked their tiny dogs while banging pans with spoons, teenagers rallied as if preparing for a rock concert, and a never-ending chain of cars crawled around the Plaza de Mayo, their drivers honking their horns and waving Argentine flags. The warm summer weather contributed to what turned out to be a magically peaceful demonstration. A climate of intense empathy overwhelmed those who walked past the historical Cathedral and old City Hall as though taking their Sunday walk after church. To be sure, there were chants and songs, but what prevailed was gentle talk. Although the whole political class was the target of criticism, Grosso and Rodríguez Saá were the most vilified (*Clarín*, 2001). The people expressed their rejection of rulers who had failed to listen to their demands for change, but they did so very urbanely.

This atmosphere lasted until half past two in the morning, when most people returned to their homes. However, organized groups stayed in the Plaza de Mayo and took the opportunity to launch a violent attack on government premises (Semán and Bleta, 2001). The police repression that ensued closely replicated the events of December 19, when a spontaneous and nonviolent demonstration by middle-class citizens was followed by aggressive attacks by political activists and gangs of hoodlums that provoked police repression (Braslavsky, 2001). This time, however, the two phases of protest were separated, and therefore no innocent civilians were caught in the crossfire. The next morning, thousands of middle-class citizens and families who had experienced a mass get-together of sorts learned from the radio and television that their peaceful protest had ended in violence.

After the confrontations in the Plaza de Mayo, the riots moved on a dozen blocks away to the Congress building. Some demonstrators managed to get into the building, set furniture on fire, and throw a few paintings and statues out onto the street. The perpetrators did not go much farther, and the damage was limited, but images of the Congress on fire were broadcast worldwide and made the events seem more dramatic than they had actually been.

The first consequence of the riots was the resignation of Carlos Grosso, but it was clear that the president had also been weakened: not many days before, his predecessor had resigned in response to similar events. Aware of his vulnerability, Rodríguez Saá called for a summit of Peronist governors at the presidential holiday retreat of Chapadmalal. He expected to get the backing of the governors, but he was wrong. Of the 14 Peronist governors, only 5 attended. The congressional majority that had appointed him just a few days before failed to come to his defense, making it clear that the president's fate was in the governors' hands. Rejected by the public in the streets and realizing that he lacked support from his own party, Rodríguez Saá returned to his home province on December 30, announcing his resignation after one week in office.

The situation seemed to replicate the events that had led to the resignation of de la Rúa. The pattern can be summed up as follows: popular—albeit not always spontaneous—protests led to the ousting of a constitutional president and left formal power in congressional hands, while real power rested with the provincial authorities. In both cases, the governors' decision to act—or to remain quiet—shaped events. They isolated de la Rúa and Rodríguez Saá, leaving them no alternative but to resign, and they decided who would succeed each of these failed presidents. Their next choice was Senator Eduardo Duhalde, the PJ presidential candidate who had been defeated by de la Rúa and the 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. Thus, in a completely unexpected twist of fate, he was called on to complete the term of the man who had beaten him in 1999.

CONCLUSION

Conventional wisdom has it that the events of December 2001, which led to the resignation of two constitutional presidents, were ignited by popular revolt and solved through parliamentary means. By contrast, I argue that there was a third, crucial factor behind the origin and the outcome of the crisis: the (more or less purposeful) action of key Peronist subnational executives, first mayors and then governors. This brings two mostly overlooked elements to the fore: party politics (it was the Peronist leaders who prepared the stage for their return to power, not the spontaneous actions of a mob) and subnational politics (it was at the governors' summits rather than through regular congressional proceedings that the key decisions were made).

In this paper, I set out to answer three questions: to what degree the main opposition party was involved, whether the rebellion was spontaneous or orchestrated, and who the main actors in the resolution of the crisis were. As the narrative shows, the by-elections of October 2001 gave the PJ a congressional majority. While it cannot be said that the party aimed to topple the president, its leaders were aware of the fragility of the ruling coalition and acted accordingly. Their goal was not to support the president but to secure his office should he step down. They did not bring about de la Rúa's downfall, but they did not do much to prevent it.

The answer to the second question is mixed. The *Argentinazo*, as the street protests of December 2001 came to be known, was not a homogeneous phenomenon. It included "the wave of food riots that occurred, along with thousands of people blockading roads and bridges throughout the country and the banging of pots and pans in the main plaza of Buenos Aires" (Auyero, 2006: 10). In and around Buenos Aires, there were concurrent demonstrations by at least three different social sectors: the middle-class citizens of the Federal District, the urban poor of the surrounding metropolitan areas, and the various criminal gangs of the suburban lumpen proletariat. The motivations and behavior of these groups were different. Middle-class protesters (the pot-bangers) objected to the bank freeze and were particularly irritated by the de la Rúa speech broadcast on the afternoon of December 19. The urban poor (the looters) had more

prosaic needs and concrete objectives: to take home as many goodies as possible, particularly but not exclusively food. The goals of the gangs do not require much explanation; they mingled with the looters and benefited from the confusion. Activists from extreme left parties also played a role, more in igniting the violence in the Federal District than in fueling the suburban disturbances. In sum, the spontaneity of the protests was limited to the first group, whereas the second was linked to or organized by local political bosses from the province of Buenos Aires and the third was marginal.

On the third question, I have shown that although formal institutions such as the Congress played a part, most decisions were made at the informal summit meetings of the Peronist governors and not by the federal authorities.

This article's focus on Peronism and provinces has highlighted historical continuities that underlie contemporary Argentine politics, no matter how revolutionary the events of 2001 may have appeared. Jorge Luis Borges once said that "Peronists are neither good nor bad, they are incorrigible." Be that as it may, he was hinting at resilience, perhaps the most salient feature of the country's political life.

NOTES

1. In 1999 a coalition formed by the UCR and the Frente para un País Solidario (Front for a Solidary Nation—FREPASO) won the presidential elections, the former placing the president and the latter the vice president. FREPASO was a recently formed, mostly urban and middle-class party that included disparate groups from Peronist splinter factions to human rights advocates.

2. In 1989 President Raúl Alfonsín resigned six months before the end of his term because of economic turbulence and social turmoil. The events that interrupted the UCR term in 2001 are described below.

3. In 2001 more than 24 percent of the Argentine population lived in the 24 departments of the province of Buenos Aires that surround the homonymous city. The province covers roughly 0.14 percent of the country's total area and therefore has an extremely high population density.

4. As Auyero (2006: 1) points out, these events highlight an understudied "grey zone," namely "the obscure (and obscured) links that looters maintain with established power-holders."

5. One of de la Rúa's aides, who afterward represented him in the case brought against him for alleged misuse of legal force, reported that the evidence on four of the protesters who were killed by the police suggested that they were the victims of executions rather than involuntary casualties. Some former government officers still claim 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.

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