News

A light-skinned man with black and gray hair who is wearing a suit jacket speaks into a micro

Argentine presidential candidate Economy Minister Sergio Massa addresses supporters as he reacts to the results of the presidential election in Buenos Aires Oct. 22, 2023. Massa, the Peronist party candidate, received 36.7% of the vote and faces a November runoff against candidate Javier Milei, a libertarian upstart who got 30% of the vote. (OSV News photo/Mariana Nedelcu, Reuters)



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Argentina's ruling Peronist movement pulled out a surprise performance in the Oct. 22 presidential election, with Economy Minister Sergio Massa taking the most votes and advancing to a runoff in November against libertarian upstart Javier Milei, who has verbally assailed Pope Francis.

Massa won 36.7% of the vote, despite a raft of economic woes rocking Argentina including rising inflation reaching 140%, a plunging currency and growing poverty. Milei claimed 30% of the vote -- little changed since his stunning upset in the August primary election.

The runoff pits two candidates with competing visions for the future of Argentina against one another, with Milei -- who campaigned with a chainsaw to symbolize slashing the state including cutting spending -- confronting a resilient Peronist movement promoting "social justice" in the form of free access to education at levels, health and social benefits.

Looming over the campaign is Francis, who provokes complicated feelings for some Argentines -- especially right-leaning Peronist opponents -- reflecting the deep political divisions in Argentina.

"He's an important figure. He's a figure respected by most of the traditional parties," said sociologist Fortunato Mallimaci, who studies religion in Argentina. "What happens is that an anti-system outsider like Milei takes advantage of [the pope] to question things," he told OSV News.

Milei campaigned on ditching Argentina's peso for the U.S. dollar, legalizing firearms and slashing state services -- which Massa promised to keep -- while pledging a referendum on abortion, which was decriminalized in 2020. He railed against corruption and the political class, which he called "the caste" for the perceived privileges they enjoyed in an increasingly impoverished country.

But he also verbally assailed Francis, calling the pontiff and fellow Argentine "a malignant presence on earth" and branding him a "filthy leftist." Attacks during the campaign's closing rally Oct. 18 caused special controversy as economist and Milei adviser, Alberto Benegas Lynch, called for severing diplomatic ties with the Vatican "while the totalitarian spirit resides there," words the candidate himself later explained saying he does not intend to break ties with the Vatican.

Archbishop Jorge García Cuerva of Buenos Aires responded with regret, saying in a radio interview: "We're experiencing a violent moment, with words, aggression. I think that we need to build bridges, the culture of encounter, this idea that the pope is working on."

"We find ourselves embarrassed by a campaign closing event," García Cuerva said, where someone proclaims such slogans "in the name of 'my Catholic religion.' "

"No one antagonizes Catholics in a Catholic country for no good reason. ... Who's to be mobilized by that?" Nicolás Saldías, senior analyst with the Economist Intelligence Unit, told OSV News. He pointed to rural, conservative regions where the Peronists outperformed expectations and "the anti-pope narrative is not seen very kindly," likely hurting Milei.

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A spokesman for the Argentine bishops' conference declined to comment on electoral matters. Priests working in Buenos Aires' shantytowns -- known as curas villeros -- who were close with the then-Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio (now Pope Francis) celebrated a Mass of reparation in September after Milei's comments.

"We were very hurt, and astonished, shocked, by the attacks one of the candidates had. These were statements that deeply saddened Pope Francis," Fr. Lorenzo De Vedia, known as "Toto" told OSV News.

While slum priests voiced their outrage at the anti-pope rhetoric, many in the Argentine Catholic church stayed mum prior to the election.

"The economy is going terribly, the ruling classes, not just the politicians, are far removed from the needs that people are going through," De Vedia continued. "That's why this void was left for this man to appear, who channels this discontent shouting, with eccentric attitudes. ... But since people are dissatisfied with politics in general, they support this."

The Mass of reparation -- held in a Buenos Aires shantytown Sept. 5 -- was not unanimously supported by church officials, according to observers.

"I think that silence is also engaging in politics," Fr. José María di Paola, known as "Padre Pepe," another prominent cura villero, told OSV News.

"It's an angry vote against politicians," he said of the election.

Fernándo Gómez, a teacher in the northern city of Salta, said he would vote for Milei "because he's the only one who tells the truth. ... He's the only one saying we must cut this; we must stop this theft. He's coming with something new that is sometimes different from the usual suspects."

Peronists, meanwhile, speak of Milei with skepticism -- especially of his proposals for cutting social spending, which the Peronist party rejects.

"It was and is the only party that really is concerned about poor people," said David Gónzales, a Peronist supporter and shopkeeper in suburban Buenos Aires. "It's searching for true social justice," added his brother Moises.

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