

Book Review/Reseña

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Ignacio A. López. *La república del fraude y su crisis. Política y poder en tiempos de Roberto M. Ortiz y Ramón S. Castillo: Argentina, 1938–1943.* Rosario: Prohistoria Ediciones, 2018.

Ignacio A. López examines a crucial moment in the twentieth-century history of Argentina: the government of Roberto Ortiz and Ramón Castillo (1938–1943). This was the second period of civilian rule following the military coup of 1930, and these years have not received the attention they deserve, considering their pivotal position between the military coups of 1930 and 1943, the latter of which extinguished hopes for democracy and ultimately ushered in the transformational government of Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955).

Ortiz and Castillo represented the two leading groups participating in a coalition of political parties that governed from 1932 to 1943, often maintaining the fiction of democracy while seeking to exclude the majority party, the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR, or Radical Party), through electoral fraud and intimidation. The author places the Ortiz-Castillo period in the larger context of Argentina's expansion of democracy after the 1912–1916 electoral reforms, an era that saw the emergence and then dominance of Argentine politics by the Radicals.

López looks at three sets of connected issues to explain the evolution of the political crisis that led to the removal of Castillo by a military coup in 1943. First, as calls for democracy from opposition parties and the public increased during the 1930s, conservative elements of the victorious coalition in the 1937 presidential election relied more, and not less, on fraudulent and illegitimate maneuvers. Simultaneously, the political elite lost several leaders who had previously—either by their popularity or acumen—succeeded in stabilizing the complicated politics of the era. Second, Ortiz (reformist) and Castillo (conservative) offered very different solutions to the unresolved problems of democratization that had emerged after the Sáenz Peña

reforms of 1912. They did so during an era that was colored by the international circumstances of global war and ideological polarization, in which debate about both international and domestic matters had become increasingly intense and political cleavages more acute. Third, the author emphasizes that politics, and particularly the political leadership of Ortiz and Castillo—how they built their political capital through engagement in the provincial issues, party networks, and different factions within the armed forces—should be front and center in explaining the events of the period.

The author seeks to unravel the era's complexities by focusing on two areas: the political networks at the national and provincial level, and the institutional and political conflicts that took place in the electoral and parliamentary arenas. This focus is appropriate given the difficulties the executive branch faced in managing an increasingly divided coalition. President Ortiz represented a minority branch of the displaced Radical Party that had cooperated with and participated in the government that followed the 1930 coup. Seeking to stabilize and expand his base of support, Ortiz promised an end to fraud and the institution of full democracy, a promise that appealed to the population at large and the Radicals in particular. His project was cut short, however, when his health began to decline as a result of diabetes, resulting in his having to effectively hand control of the executive branch to his vice president in mid-1940. Castillo and his conservative supporters sought to stop the democratic opening as it promised to end their hold on political power.

The first three chapters trace how Ortiz used the promotion of democracy to build his coalition. By eradicating electoral fraud in the provinces and removing potential opponents from office, he was able to sponsor those who might join with him. Chapters Four and Five follow the fractious transfer of the mandate from Ortiz to Castillo. Initially a temporary measure, it soon became clear that the president's health would not allow him to resume his duties. Nonetheless, Ortiz and his supporters sought to maintain hope for his return, while the president's opponents used his vulnerability to launch political attacks to force him from office. He did not officially resign until 1942, but it was Castillo who controlled executive power after replacing cabinet members loyal to Ortiz between September 1940 and March 1941. Chapter Six examines the strategies employed by Castillo to construct his own coalition in the provinces, paying attention to the cases of Buenos Aires, San Juan, Catamarca, and Jujuy. In Chapter Seven, we witness the impact that the passing of Ortiz and former president Justo had on the political landscape. Justo had always eyed a return to the Casa Rosada after passing the mandate to his chosen successor, Ortiz. The final chapter covers events that led to the coup of 1943, as well as the presidential campaign it interrupted.

The strengths of the work lie in the extensive sources that López has uncovered for the period and the analysis he makes of the history that those sources reveal. He

very clearly identifies the various political forces at play at both the national and provincial levels, charting the importance of each in the coalitions that Ortiz and Castillo sought to construct. This requires a detailed understanding of the politics of each province and the way that provincial forces competed for the attention and support of the Casa Rosada.

Documentation includes national and provincial newspapers, congressional records, and, above all, the voluminous records of the Presidential Archive of Agustín P. Justo, which are replete with correspondence between political figures across the nation. These sources and the author's analysis are nowhere more in evidence than in his investigation of the federal intervention sent by President Ortiz to the province of San Juan in 1938. Ortiz sought to remove a conservative governor who relied on fraud and intimidation for his maintenance in office. López demonstrates that the actions of the federal authorities – insisting on strict legality in the holding of elections and the cleansing of the electoral rolls – more than merely removing an opponent actually illustrate the genuine intention of Ortiz to restore democracy in Argentina.

The author is able to demonstrate how, during 1941, in contrast to the objectives of Ortiz, Castillo, as acting president due to the ill-health of Ortiz, was able to cement his control over the executive branch and strengthen the hand of his party in the provinces under federal intervention. Castillo's home province of Catamarca provided an example of how he achieved this feat. Despite expresident Justo playing an active part in the political maneuvering taking place in the runup to elections for provincial governor and representatives to Congress, Castillo was able to preside over elections that saw a victory for the members of the local PDN over the interests of those who favored the politics of Justo and Ortiz. As López notes, Castillo's success demonstrated that a conservative victory was possible in the context of electoral normality, challenging the approach of Justo and Ortiz which suggested that the mutually-enforcing democratic opening and a strong Radical core in the coalition was crucial to any future success.

For many years scholars largely dismissed the importance of politics in the period 1930–1943 due to the fraud and violence present in the elections of the era and the seeming dominance exerted by the conservatives who assumed office following the toppling of President Hipólito Yrigoyen by the military in 1930. Other explanations for events focused on the exogenous shocks of depression and global conflict. Ignacio López belongs to a new generation of scholars who demonstrate the importance of domestic politics in understanding the changes taking place during this decade. His discovery and use of the sources and his wide-ranging examinations of national and provincial political processes deserve commendation and attention.

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