

## The Spasmodic Trajectories of Charismatic Movements

The preceding two chapters demonstrated that leaders who seek to revive charismatic movements in their own name must leverage specific strategies and conditions to reactivate the followers' fervent attachments and consolidate independent authority. Chapter 5 indicated that new leaders must combine material and symbolic cues – impressive performance to demonstrate heroic capacities and symbolic ties to the founder and his mission of transcendence – to reinvigorate the followers' identification with the movement and enhance the new leaders' charismatic appeal. In turn, Chapter 6 demonstrated that, to effectively implement these strategies, successors must fulfill three conditions. First, they must achieve self-starter status by rising to power years after the founder's disappearance; second, they must emerge following the eruption of a crisis that makes people once again feel the need to be saved; third, the new leaders must adopt a personalistic style reminiscent of the founder in order to establish unmediated, affective connections with the followers.

Given the strategies and conditions required to revive charismatic movements, the present chapter investigates the pattern in which these movements unfold over time and indicates the negative consequences for democracy. To do so, I examine the trajectory of a single charismatic movement – Argentine Peronism – over the course of seven decades. This historical analysis reveals how the personalistic mechanism identified in the previous chapters generates a spasmodic and self-perpetuating cycle of politics in which periods of predominant charismatic leadership alternate with periods of leaderless fragmentation. I demonstrate how this mechanism of movement revival weakens democracy by diluting the quality of citizens' representation, repeatedly subjugating democratic political institutions to the hegemonic authority of charismatic leaders, and undermining the development of a robust programmatic party system.

This chapter challenges the conclusions drawn by scholars of routinization regarding the pattern in which charismatic movements unfold and influence democracy. Existing literature states that the survival of charismatic movements requires institutionalization – a process in which the movement loses its personalistic nature, intermediaries within the movement establish a programmatic brand, and they develop an organizational network to sustain the support of loyal partisans (Jowitt 1992, 107; Madsen and Snow 1991, 29; Shils 1965, 202–5; Weber 1922/1978, 246). Because these components of routinization are positively associated with democracy (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1969; Lupu 2014; Samuels and Zucco 2014), this argument implies that, by setting in motion a process of routinization, charismatic movements can actually lead to the development of stable, democratic party systems.

In contrast, I claim that the personalistic core of charismatic movements remains intact over time and continues to shape key characteristics of the political system. Successors adopt the founder's charismatic style of leadership in order to claim the followers' preexisting attachments and consolidate power. To prove extraordinary capacities and appear as the symbolic reincarnations of the founder, self-starters enact bold initiatives that overtake party politics and disregard institutional constraints. During this process of approbation, these new leaders mimic the founder by engaging in top-down, authoritarian behaviors, overriding mechanisms of vertical and horizontal accountability, and marginalizing those who question their authority. This personalistic approach makes the successors appear triumphant, but only temporarily. Indeed, the nearsighted nature of their audacious policies, combined with the weakness of institutional safeguards, also set the leaders up for eventual failure. Through this erratic, up-and-down process, charismatic movements perpetually inhibit programmatic and institutional development.

The following section presents a theoretical discussion that integrates the perspectives of movement followers and leaders to explain the spasmodic trajectories of charismatic movements. I argue that, while generating tremendous political and economic volatility, the spasmodic pattern in which these movements develop reinforces rather than dilutes the personalistic nature of the movement. I then discuss the consequences of this process for democracy at the individual and system levels. Next, I illustrate this self-reinforcing cycle using the case of Peronism, which has experienced four distinct waves of charismatic leadership over its eighty-year history. The first wave rose with Juan Perón's ascension in the 1940s and receded with his forced exile in 1955; the second culminated in Perón's return to power in 1973 and faded with his death in the following year; the third arrived with Carlos Menem's rise in 1989 and retreated with the end of his second administration in 1999; the fourth transpired with Néstor Kirchner's presidency in 2003 and declined with Cristina Kirchner's exit in 2015. I conclude by briefly discussing the fifth wave of Peronism, which recently emerged with the election of Alberto Fernández to

the presidency (and Cristina to the vice presidency) in 2019.<sup>1</sup> While a comprehensive account of this period lies beyond the scope of this chapter, for each wave I highlight key events and processes that have contributed to the charismatic revival of the movement.

Through this investigation, I illustrate how each wave of Peronism reinvigorated citizens' charismatic identity and temporarily strengthened each leader's personalistic control while simultaneously sowing the seeds for the leader's demise. The results underscore the endogenous nature of charismatic movement revival and stress its deleterious impact on democracy. The findings also illustrate how, paradoxically, such movements generate periods of political strength and coherence as well as periods of recession and political fragmentation, the latter of which, in turn, helps ready the soil for the movement's re-emergence.

### 7.1 THE FITS AND STARTS OF CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS

The survival of charismatic movements hinges primarily on the resilient nature of citizens' emotional attachments to the founder and his eternal promise of transcendence. While the political salience of these attachments waxes and wanes depending on the circumstances, the personalistic nature of the bonds persists, even during times in which there is no leader to guide the way (Huddy 2001, 49). Thus, when favorable conditions return, self-starters who convincingly portray themselves as heirs of the founder can inject the followers' latent attachments with renewed energy. The capacity to mobilize these followers into political action grants self-starters a formidable advantage over other candidates and paves the way for the movement's revival.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the stable nature of the followers' charismatic bonds, the influence of new leaders is contingent and time-bound. One reason for this is that these self-starters – like the founder – must seek power under conditions of crisis. Without a crisis, citizens would not feel the need to be saved and would therefore be less likely to view even compelling self-starters in a heroic light. Additionally, to substantiate their extraordinary abilities, new leaders must enact policies that trade sustainability for an impressive, short-term impact. Accomplishing this requires successors to exercise their own skill and appeal, but it also depends on factors that lie beyond the leaders' control, such as an amenable geopolitical environment, a favorable socioeconomic context, or natural resource windfalls available for exploitation. Because these conditions occur intermittently, the revival of charismatic movements

<sup>1</sup> For clarity, I refer to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as “Cristina” throughout this chapter while referring to Alberto Fernández as “Fernández.”

<sup>2</sup> As indicated in previous chapters, the rank-and-file followers of Peronism and Chavismo constitute approximately one-third of the voting population in Argentina and Venezuela, respectively. In both cases, this core group of supporters has remained fairly stable over time.

unfolds in an episodic manner that contrasts with the stable, linear development of institutionalized parties.

Ambitious self-starters who successfully leverage the abovementioned conditions, achieve heroic performance, and tie themselves to the founder's mission of salvation to consolidate remarkable authority. Yet their personalistic victory also plants the seeds for their eventual demise, deepening the erratic nature of charismatic movements. First, the bold policies of self-starters are inherently unsustainable. To achieve an impressive impact, these policies weaken institutional checks designed to safeguard the policies' sustainability (Bersch 2016, 207; Levitsky and Murillo 2013, 100). Additionally, because the early success of the policies temporarily alleviates popular suffering, citizens' intense need for a charismatic savior also fades away. Self-starters' symbolic association with the founder therefore becomes increasingly strained, especially as their extraordinary performance begins to wane.

Self-starters further limit their own power by surrounding themselves with faithful confidants rather than experienced bureaucrats and party leaders. Upon rising to the presidency, these successors tend to establish these personalistic ruling coalitions – which consist of loyal friends, family members, and other sycophants – to overcome party constraints and limit institutional checks on their authority. Initially, such yes-men help pave the way for self-starters to dominate politics. But as conditions grow more challenging and performance begins to decline, these advisers' lack of experience and inability to challenge the opinions of the self-starters, no matter how imprudent, further jeopardize the leaders' prospects for continued popularity and success. Moreover, because underlings often enjoy kickbacks in exchange for their loyalty, accusations of corruption can further erode the legitimacy of the once-popular self-starters.

In short, the combination of followers' resilient personalistic attachments and successors' dramatic but short-lived power causes charismatic movements to develop oscillating trajectories that contrast with the steady path of routinization. At the outset, the charismatic founder establishes a heroic legacy as an everlasting savior by providing the suffering masses with unprecedented recognition and tangible, seemingly miraculous benefits. Crucially, the founder disappears before his policies fully collapse, exonerating him and protecting his legacy. Soon after, the combination of his disappearance and the exhaustion of his policies unleash a crisis and power vacuum. This causes the movement to recede from power and ushers in a period of leaderless fragmentation. However, the disintegration of parties, the weakness of democratic institutions, and the followers' ongoing devotion to the movement make it difficult for unaffiliated leaders and parties to rise up, coalesce around a meaningful identity that reaches beyond mere opposition to the movement, and stabilize the country on their own terms. Consequently, the country can languish for years under conditions of crisis, uncertainty, uninspiring leadership, and institutional weakness.

Under these circumstances, scholars of routinization contend that it is virtually impossible for charismatic movements to regenerate themselves (Kostadinova and Levitt 2014, 500–1; Madsen and Snow 1991, 25–28). Conversely, I argue that citizens' suffering and frustration with weak leadership during such periods make them yearn for a new hero to rise up and resolve the situation in a manner reminiscent of the founder. Thus, paradoxically, the "leaderless" period following the founder's disappearance eventually creates the opportunity for self-starters to revive the movement by playing to its personalistic roots. In particular, when the context shifts to favor self-starters – when the crisis has erupted and conditions realign to enable these new leaders to avoid blame and rise independently – the followers are likely to find the self-starter's personalistic style, as well as her promise to provide them with much-needed relief, reminiscent of the founder. Thus, leveraging the combination of crisis conditions and personalistic tactics, self-starters can catapult the movement back into power.

Even so, because the legitimacy of self-starters rests on the movement's charismatic foundation, these leaders can only restore the movement to power temporarily. When the performance of their audacious policies inevitably crests, their loyal advisers are unable to provide guidance; political institutions, which have been starved of power, cannot easily correct these policy failures; and the successors' symbolic influence erodes. Yet because the followers' loyalty remains grounded in the founder's heroic legacy, the fall of self-starters – while disappointing – does not compromise these citizens' underlying faith in the movement. Rather, many supporters come to view failed self-starters as fraudulent representatives of the movement. As these citizens suffer from the resultant crisis, they begin to look for another, more convincing savior to pick up the founder's baton. Eventually, this search for a new hero positions the movement to surge back to power on another wave of charismatic leadership, led by a different self-starter who can don the founder's mantle.

In sum, charismatic movements unfold in fitful waves. After the founder has gone, self-starters rise to power and consolidate authority using favorable conditions and personalistic tactics, which ultimately lead to their downfall. In turn, the failures of these leaders generate crises that cause suffering citizens to long for a new savior who seems capable of resolving the situation. Therefore, the movement swings back into power under new and momentarily compelling self-starters. The rise of the new personalistic leader causes the cycle to repeat, generating a self-reinforcing pattern of political and economic volatility.

## 7.2 THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT REVIVAL FOR DEMOCRACY

### 7.2.1 Individual-Level Consequences

The spasmodic trajectories of charismatic movements undermine democracy in several ways. At the individual level, the personalistic nature of followers'

attachments dilutes the quality of their programmatic and organizational representation. First, the followers expect new leaders to achieve seemingly miraculous performance to prove themselves worthy of the founder's mantle. In the short term, the followers receive benefits such as food, medical care, jobs, homes, and even toys, all of which tangibly improve their lives. However, this expectation motivates self-starters to achieve early success at great expense, compromising the programmatic integrity and sustainability of their policies (Bersch 2016; Levitsky and Murillo 2013). To take personal credit for these policies, charismatic leaders carry them out in a direct and impromptu fashion rather than working through institutional channels, which further undermines the policies' effectiveness and durability (Bersch 2016, 207). In short, by incentivizing new leaders to implement daring, irresponsible reforms without regard for substantive content or sustainability, charismatic movements weaken vertical accountability and compromise citizens' programmatic representation.

In addition to programmatic concerns, the intimate nature of followers' unmediated bonds to the movement's leaders hinders the development of strong organizational linkages. On the surface, charismatic leaders frequently tout their movements as driven by a strong grassroots spirit. Indeed, both Perón and Chávez publicly declared their movements to be propelled by an "organized community" of followers. In reality, however, charismatic founders and their successors exercise direct authority and cultivate paternalistic, top-down attachments with their supporters (Kampwirth 2010, 12). Moreover, as I will illustrate in the following section, followers tend to *openly embrace* the top-down nature of their attachments with these leaders: while perceiving themselves as lowly and humble, these citizens view their leaders as superior. Thus, the rank-and-file profess ongoing loyalty to the movement not because they feel empowered to become politically active, but because they wish to maintain close ties to their beloved leaders. This intensely hierarchical relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers suppresses the development of organizational ties that inspire followers to become empowered, politically engaged citizens.

### 7.2.2 System-Level Consequences

At the system level, charismatic movements undermine democracy by encouraging authoritarian behaviors in their leaders and weakening political institutions crucial to sustaining democratic accountability. Charismatic leaders seek to personally dominate the party (or parties) affiliated with the movement in order to ward off internal threats to their power and demonstrate that they answer directly to the people rather than to self-seeking party operatives. To achieve this, they often appoint themselves or their close confidants to serve as head of the party once they have risen to power; they also take measures to keep the party bureaucracy weak and drown out potential voices of contention from

within. Additionally, charismatic leaders often create new parties and party labels that are more directly associated with their personal image – while maintaining control over the original, movement-affiliated party – to enhance their individual power. As a result of these efforts to increase personal influence, parties tied to the movement tend to remain weak, fragmented, and dependent on the individual leader. This outcome contrasts with the routinization thesis, which holds that charismatic movements that survive the death of their founders lead to the emergence of depersonalized parties that accumulate institutional strength over time.

In addition to weakening parties aligned with the leader, charismatic movements make it difficult for opposing actors to coalesce and develop a coherent, well-institutionalized alternative. The symbolic narrative crafted by the charismatic founder and reinforced by subsequent leaders accentuates the personalistic cleavage defined by citizens' allegiance or aversion to the movement while suppressing the relevance of more traditional political divides (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016, 26). Furthermore, the leaders' intolerance of dissent – expressed through acerbic rhetoric, discriminatory legalism, and even occasional repression – marginalizes opposing voices and curtails the resources of potential rivals (Weyland 2013). Consequently, the opposition to charismatic movements tends to be comprised of programmatically heterogeneous actors that struggle to unite and rally voters based on principles beyond their shared aversion to the movement. Thus, over time, interactions between movement leaders and their adversaries reinforces the personalistic division of society into followers and opponents of the movement while continually undermining the development of coherent principles and programs crucial to programmatic parties.

Finally, the emergence and revival of charismatic movements undermine the development of other political institutions, including the legislature, courts, and government agencies. To tighten their grip on power and take personal credit for impressive performance, movement leaders often override the legislature and rule by emergency decree. They also attack institutions that threaten to check their power, such as Congress, the courts, the Census Bureau, and the Central Bank. For example, charismatic leaders often stack these institutions with loyalists; distort information to discredit institutions that threaten their authority; revise existing laws to limit the power of those institutions; and create new institutions to tighten their personal grip on power. Because each self-starter that revives the movement adopts these destructive behaviors, charismatic movements repeatedly erode the transparency, effectiveness, and stability of institutions from across the political system that are vital to the development of a healthy democracy.

The recurrent damage that charismatic movements inflict on political parties, opposition actors, and institutions establishes a vicious cycle of political and economic volatility. Each successive leader must demonstrate superhuman capacities by implementing bold, irresponsible, and short-lived policies with little infrastructure. To ensure the success of these policies, the leader suppresses

dissent and bulldozes institutional constraints from within the party and across the political system. Thus, when the self-starter's policies collapse and crisis erupts, the country's weak institutional foundation does little to mitigate the consequences. Thus, the burden of the leader's failure falls on the citizenry.

Remarkably, however, while citizens may blame particular successors for each collapse, their faith in the charismatic founder and his mission of salvation endures. Moreover, the widespread suffering caused by the crisis, combined with the powerless state of institutions, cause citizens to seek out yet another savior capable of rescuing them from their desperate situation. This desire creates the opportunity for a new self-starter to ascend to and consolidate power based on the promise to embody the founder's mission to provide the people with a more prosperous future. Thus, the volatile cycle of charismatic leadership repeats, intensifying problems of executive aggrandizement, institutional decay, and recurrent crises.

The remainder of this chapter demonstrates the spasmodic nature of charismatic movements by examining the historical trajectory of Argentine Peronism. As shown in Figure 7.1, I analyze four waves that Peronism has completed in which leaders surged to power, dominated the political system, and subsequently receded, leaving economic and political crises in their wake. I also briefly discuss the beginning of the movement's fifth wave, which emerged with the election of Alberto Fernández in October 2019.

As I illustrate subsequently, during each wave of the movement, the leader used charisma to establish a magnetic cult of personality, concentrated executive power, exerted hegemonic control over the movement, marginalized opposition parties, and successfully overpowered political institutions. Between each of these waves, society suffered a serious crisis, opposition administrations failed to govern effectively, and the movement endured extensive fragmentation. By stringing these waves together, I demonstrate how charismatic movements can perpetually harm democracy and generate an endogenous cycle of economic and political booms and busts.

### 7.3 THE REVIVAL OF CHARISMA AND THE TUMULTUOUS HISTORY OF THE PERONIST MOVEMENT

#### 7.3.1 The First Wave Rises: Juan Perón and the Foundation of the Movement

Juan Perón made his political debut in Argentina in the wake of the *Década Infame*, a ten-year period following the Great Depression of 1930 in which a repressive authoritarian government called the *Concordancia* ruled. During this time, the country's agricultural economy collapsed, leading millions of poor citizens to flee from the countryside to overcrowded cities in search of jobs in the growing industrial sector (Madsen and Snow 1991, 44; Page 1983, 41–43).

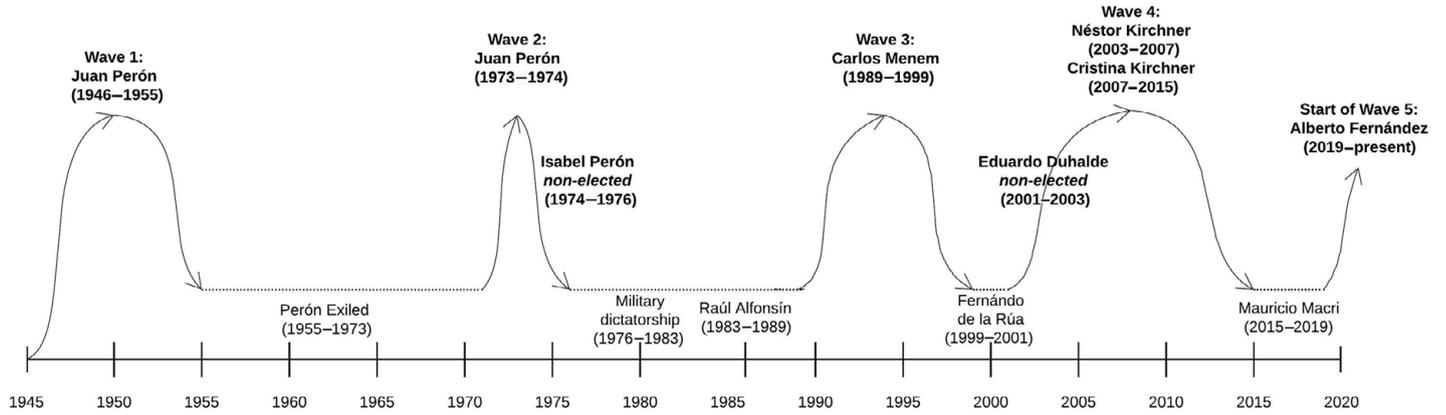


FIGURE 7.1. Waves of Peronist revival

While many found employment in the Federal Capital and surrounding Province of Buenos Aires, rapid urbanization and the absence of workers' rights caused these newly urban laborers – who constituted a majority of the population – terrible suffering in the form of low wages, long hours, job insecurity, and deplorable living conditions (James 1988, 8; Kirkpatrick 1971, 30–34; Madsen and Snow 1991, 47; McGuire 1997, 47–48).

The suffering endured by the masses, combined with their right to vote, provided the impetus for Perón to found a powerful charismatic movement.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the military and conservative politicians discounted and even repressed these citizens, Perón perceived them as “a ready reservoir of support” (Page 1983, 66). To win their favor, he became Secretary of Labor after participating in the 1943 military coup that toppled the *Concordancia*. His fellow officers ridiculed him for assuming this modest position, which oversaw the decrepit National Labor Department that workers referred to as the “elephants' graveyard” (Corach, author interview, 2016; Page 1983, 63). But Perón used his new post to forge profound, unmediated connections with the neglected masses, who had been searching for a savior to improve their desperate circumstances (Madsen and Snow 1991, 46–48).

### 7.3.1.1 *Establishing Charismatic Attachments*

Perón fulfilled the first condition for the establishment of charismatic attachments by using his position as Minister of Labor to reach out to the neglected masses and grant them a role in politics for the first time in the country's history. Thanks to his leadership, poor and working-class Argentines underwent a transformation from voiceless outsiders to dignified citizens who occupied a meaningful role in society (James 1988, 17). In addition, Perón satisfied the second condition by implementing bold and extensive reforms on behalf of his *descamisados* (shirtless ones). Due to his reforms, millions of Argentinians enjoyed unprecedented material benefits, including newfound job security in urban factories, a 40-percent wage increase, paid vacation, and new homes (Ascher 1984, 51; Madsen and Snow 1991, 52). Grateful for their elevated status and material prosperity, these people came to worship Perón as their savior (*ibid.*, 46–48).

Over the next two years, some factions of the military came to resent Perón's rapidly increasing power (Page 1983, 112–19). On October 12, 1945, in an attempt to curb his power, they came together to arrest the Colonel with the naïve hope that removing him from politics would diminish his influence. However, the military vastly underestimated the political capital Perón had gained through his working-class supporters. Days later, on October 17, millions of poor Argentines flooded the plaza in front of the presidential palace to

<sup>3</sup> Unlike previous generations, who were immigrants to Argentina, many of these individuals were born in Argentina and thus had the right to vote (James 1988, 17).

demand his release from prison – a day that would henceforth be commemorated annually as “Loyalty Day” (ibid., 127). A few months later, in February 1946, Perón went on to win the presidential election (James 1988, 9).

During two presidential terms (1946–55), Perón deepened the direct, emotional bonds he had cultivated with his followers by recognizing the suffering and exclusion they endured prior to his rise to power and vowing to resolve their misery. Perón’s second wife, Eva, accentuated her husband’s appeal by portraying herself as his humble servant and quickly establishing her position as the poor’s most passionate advocate (Madsen and Snow 1991, 52; Page 1983, 79). Together, the leading couple continued to deliver new rights and material gains to the popular sectors through labor reforms, economic growth stimulated by import substitution industrialization (ISI), and social assistance channeled through the Eva Perón Foundation (Madsen and Snow 1991, 52). Perón also fulfilled the third condition of charismatic attachment and solidified his bonds with the people by crafting a powerful symbolic narrative that glorified him as a hero and “Evita” as a saint, attacked his opponents as selfish oligarchs and “defenders of class privilege,” and instilled a profound hope in Peronist followers for a more dignified and prosperous future (James 1988, 18–21; Page 1983, 144). As a result of these actions, millions of Argentines developed steadfast affective connections to Perón and pledged quasi-religious devotion to him.<sup>4</sup>

### 7.3.1.2 *Concentrating Hegemonic Authority*

During his first two presidencies, Perón used the charismatic bonds he established with his followers to launch his paradigm-shifting movement concentrate power. Indeed, though he gave workers some political voice, he never relinquished significant control to union leaders. Thus, while some have suggested that Perón intended to establish a corporatist political system (e.g., Waisman

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars question the extent to which the charismatic linkages that Perón cultivated with his followers were foundational to his political movement. Most notably, while acknowledging Perón’s personal appeal, James contends that the core identity of Peronism rested on the empowerment of organized labor rather than on the unmediated, emotional bonds that the leader formed with his rank and file (1988, 12–18). According to this interpretation, citizens’ enduring support for Perón and his movement grew primarily out of their connection to Peronist unions and organizations – actors that worked alongside Perón to achieve socioeconomic and political inclusion. In contrast, I argue that Perón’s deep, unmediated, and emotional attachments to his followers were – and remain – central to the movement’s ethos. In claiming this, I do not wish to discount the importance of political recognition, feelings of dignity, and material gains that followers experienced under Perón. Rather, I argue that the intensely personalistic, top-down nature in which these rights and benefits were granted by Perón fundamentally shaped the nature of citizens’ identification with the movement and its leaders. I base this claim in part on several previous studies that identify the crucial role of Perón’s charisma for the formation of the movement (Levitsky 2003, 36; Madsen and Snow 1991, 46–51; McGuire 1997, 50). However, as illustrated throughout this book, I also move beyond existing studies by drawing on original research to demonstrate how charisma has helped perpetuate the Peronist movement over time.

1987, 117; Wiarda 1973, 2009), which structures society into a rigid hierarchy under the State, in reality he maintained a direct relationship with his constituents in labor and industry. As Wynia states, "Perón was a very impatient and ambitious leader . . . who jealously guarded his authority from business and industrial leaders who sought to limit it" (Wynia 1978, 54, 60). Rather than ceding authority to unions, as a corporatist model would have required, the founder empowered the state (and, thus, himself) through an aggressive program of economic nationalism and ISI. With his bold policies, he gained personal control over commodity trading and lucrative industries, which enabled him to construct state institutions through which to distribute impressive benefits directly to his rank and file (*ibid.*, 47).

Between 1946 and 1949, Perón's daring reforms produced a "golden age" in Argentina. The GNP grew by 25 percent and the working and popular sectors experienced unprecedented upward mobility (Wynia 1978, 52). This period of growth resulted in immeasurable gains for poor citizens, including a newfound sense of respect, dignity, and material prosperity (James 1988, 18). Yet by deepening citizens' adoration of Perón, these victories also accelerated his executive aggrandizement. In fact, the apparently miraculous impact of his policies caused his followers to perceive him as "the ultimate guarantor" of their well-being and thus reinforced the emotional depth and political asymmetry of their relationship with him (*ibid.*, 99).

Emboldened by the fervent loyalty of his supporters, Perón dominated the political system for several years, undermining the development of parties and overpowering political institutions that threatened his superior status. Within his own "Peronist party," a loose conglomeration of conflicting factions, he "cultivated contention and disarray," such that unwavering allegiance to him constituted the only thread uniting his fractious constituents (Page 1983, 161). He also filled his administration with personal confidants who pledged unwavering devotion to him. Most prominently, he relied on Eva, his most trusted servant, to run many important affairs – including the Ministry of Labor, arguably the most important branch of his administration (Madsen and Snow 1991, 51–52). From her position next to Perón, Eva played a crucial role in sustaining and deepening his emotional connections to his followers, while always openly subordinating herself to his authority (Page 1983, 198–99).

In addition to consolidating his influence over his own supporters, Perón stifled leaders and parties who opposed him. For example, he quickly smothered attempts by the Labor Party, namely the powerful union leader Cipriano Reyes, to maintain independence from his movement (McGuire 1997, 161). He also fragmented the main opposition party, the Radical Civic Union (UCR), by enticing some of its prominent leaders to join him while repressing others (*ibid.*, 108, 208–9). To Perón's delight, the UCR facilitated his efforts by adopting a strategy of obstruction that accelerated its own disintegration. Radical leaders used obscure legal tactics to attack Perón and

publicly question his political legitimacy. Rather than tarring Perón as a criminal, this strategy accentuated the UCR's reputation for "intellectual snobbery" and demonstrated how out of touch the party had become with the general public, who adored the new president (*ibid.*, 162–63).

Beyond opposition parties, Perón limited the influence of other political institutions that threatened his power. For example, in 1945, even before he was elected president, he began issuing executive decrees such as the *Aguinaldo* – which increased nearly all workers' wages, provided an annual bonus equal to a full month's pay, and protected workers from being fired for unjust cause (Page 1983, 143). After becoming president, Perón treated Congress as an extension of his personal will, relying on the "unquestioning obedience" of inexperienced and faithful legislators, who constituted 69 percent of the Chamber of Deputies and 93 percent of the Senate (*ibid.*, 162–64). He also frequently bypassed actors and institutions that questioned his bold actions, ranging from economic advisors to the Central Bank to the Supreme Court (Wynia 1978, 68–70). In fact, he "Peronized" the entire judicial system by stacking courts with loyalists and impeaching those critical of him on grounds of "malfeasance" (Page 1983, 165–67).

In sum, the combination of Perón's charismatic appeal and his efforts to silence competing voices within his own ranks and across the political system granted him "virtually limitless power" (Page 1983, 228). The steadfast devotion of his support base was crucial to this concentration of his hegemonic authority. In turn, his profoundly personalistic influence helped reinforce his glorification. His single-handed initiation of bold economic programs to "rescue" the people made him seem even worthier of his followers' adoration. The shortsighted and self-serving character of these policies would eventually cause them to implode, destabilizing the system and harming Perón's own supporters (McGuire 1997, 59–60). Nevertheless, driven by their thirst for recognition and their charismatic perceptions of the leader, Peronist citizens would remember the initial, extraordinary success of the policies as part of a "golden age" and would blame others for the policies' eventual failures. As I will illustrate subsequently, the founder's legacy – combined with the military's violent intervention, which attempted to destroy that legacy – would help the movement survive during Perón's exile and eventually establish the conditions for his return nearly two decades later.

### 7.3.2 The First Wave Recedes: Coup, Exile, and Chaos

#### 7.3.2.1 *Policy Exhaustion*

During Perón's second presidential term (1952–55), the immediate payoffs of his shortsighted economic policies began to fade as structural weaknesses surfaced. By this time, his aggressive ISI program had drained the state's reserves of gold and foreign currency, while industrial growth had slowed and agricultural exports had plummeted (Wynia 1978, 66–68). The economic

slump that followed affected the popular sectors – his rank and file – in the form of stagnant wages, inflation, and shortages of basic goods such as meat and grain (Page 1983, 269). To protect his magnetic appeal, Perón responded to the downturn by firing his economic advisors and blaming them for problems of corruption and mismanagement. The fact that many of these individuals, including Central Bank President Miguel Miranda, had been personally appointed by Perón and had simply been following his orders did not implicate him in their guilt (Wynia 1978, 69). To the contrary, their dismissal actually vindicated Perón in the eyes of his followers and reinvigorated their support for him (Page 1983, 271–72).

Having preserved his heroic image, Perón reluctantly addressed the crisis through his Economic Plan of 1952 (Wynia 1978, 70). Composed in secret, the Plan reversed many of his prior pro-labor policies by opening Argentina to foreign capital, inviting private investors, and initiating an anti-inflationary monetary policy to stabilize the economy. Perón justified these ideological reversals using the same promise of political, economic, and social justice that he declared during his initial presidential campaign, underscoring the personalistic – rather than programmatic – nature of his leadership (Page 1983, 287). He also blamed selfish rural interests and “foreign imperialists” for attempting to thwart his righteous effort to transform Argentina, even though his excessive state intervention had generated many of the problems in the first place (Wynia 1978, 70–71). Thus, as circumstances began to improve, Perón did not suffer for renegeing on his earlier policies. Instead, from the followers’ perspective, his about-face reinforced his reputation as the ultimate problem-solver and corroborated his “genius” (ibid., 288).

Nevertheless, while Perón successfully redirected blame for the downturn and temporarily salvaged the economy, he failed to address the fundamental weaknesses of his state-centered policies, resulting in a saturated market, sluggish growth, a weakened agricultural sector, and low entrepreneurial confidence (Waisman 1987, 121; Wynia 1978, 73). Furthermore, his brazen refusal to cooperate with entrenched elites – including opposition politicians, agricultural exporters, industrial and financial leaders, elements of the military, and the Catholic Church – placed his regime on increasingly precarious ground, even though his charismatic appeal and popular support remained strong. Consequently, an elite-backed military coup ousted Perón in September 1955, forcing him to flee the country and remain in exile for eighteen years (McGuire 1997, 72–75).

### 7.3.2.2 *Resistance to Routinization*

Based on the routinization theory, Perón’s sudden disappearance should have caused his movement to fade away or transform into an institutionalized party. Yet his abrupt and violent ouster by the military only enraged his followers and deepened their affective attachments to him. Moreover, the timing of the coup – after Perón had achieved a modest economic recovery, before the complete

deterioration of his policies – helped protect his legacy and generated in his followers an intense nostalgia for the prosperity they had experienced in prior years thanks to his leadership. Throughout Perón's exile, his supporters expressed “elements of a regressive fantasy for ‘the good old days’ of a ‘golden era’ – a plaintive reflection on a glorified, utopian past” (James 1988, 98).

As I will describe subsequently, similar to routinization scholars, both the backers of the 1955 coup and subsequent democratically elected presidents underestimated the resilience of citizens' devotion to Perón. This miscalculation, combined with the intractable challenges of governing an economically dysfunctional and politically fragmented society, undermined non-Peronist actors' efforts to achieve political legitimacy. The failure of the opposition to achieve independent legitimacy, in turn, facilitated Perón's efforts to maintain his personal grip over the movement and established the conditions for his eventual resurgence in 1973.

To maintain control over his movement during his exile, Perón began by reinforcing the loyalty of his followers. His eventual successor in Argentina's presidency, General Pedro Aramburu, facilitated this task by proscribing the Peronist party, banning Perón's inner circle from participating in politics, and outlawing the use of proper names for parties (McGuire 1997, 80). Aramburu assumed that these measures would diminish Perón's influence and re-route followers' support to more traditional parties who offered “bread-and-butter unionism” (ibid., 81–82). Had Peronism routinized by this juncture, Aramburu's strategy would likely have been effective. However, the new leader's efforts only emphasized the enduring charismatic appeal of Perón – whom poor citizens viewed as single-handedly responsible for their newfound prosperity (Ciria 1974, 25). Perón took advantage of Aramburu's oversight by rallying his followers to resist the military government and fight for his return to power. Perón's supporters from across the country responded by mobilizing in a wave of “ill-defined . . . insurrection” to demand his homecoming (James 1988, 83). Thus, the proscription of Peronism actually *reinforced* the followers' identification with the movement and deepened their resistance to the new regime.

To further tighten his grip on his movement while legally barred from power, Perón undermined attempts by politicians within his own ranks to reestablish his movement without him. His followers, who had never been organized into a “well-institutionalized Peronist party,” facilitated this effort by refusing to support leftists and “neo-Peronist” leaders who proposed anything “less than the complete return of Perón” (James 1988, 83; McGuire 1997, 79). Capitalizing on this unmediated support, Perón also invoked a tactic that had served him well during his presidency: he encouraged divisions between the different factions of his movement, including hard-liners who promoted an aggressive strategy of resistance against the military regime, soft-liners who sought to negotiate with the new government, and a third group who preferred a middle path (McGuire 1997, 87).

Beyond Peronism, the opposition struggled to establish independent legitimacy and thereby contributed to Perón's position of strength. In 1957, the UCR divided into two factions: Arturo Frondizi's Intransigent UCR (UCRI), which proposed allying with Peronists to defeat Aramburu, and Ricardo Balbín's UCR of the People (UCRP), which refused to partner with Peronists and sought power independently (McGuire 1997, 84). Perón deepened this fissure by backing Frondizi's candidacy in the 1958 presidential election and calling on his supporters to vote for the UCRI candidate. Not only did this strategy further divide the UCR, but also thwarted efforts to institutionalize Peronism, as it drew a significant proportion of Peronist votes toward Frondizi and away from neo-Peronist leaders (Corach 2011).

As president, Frondizi inherited an ungovernable situation. The Peronist voters to whom he owed his victory expected him to continue the founder's bold and beloved redistributive policies. Instead, the saturated domestic market, combined with pressure from the military, led him to enact a program of strict stabilization (Wynia 1978, 87–92). This “astounding about-face” caused an uproar among workers, resulting in a series of debilitating union strikes over the course of the new leader's presidency (Ascher 1984, 187–89). Furthermore, because Frondizi failed to inspire the cooperation of industrial and agricultural leaders, his painful structural adjustment program attracted little foreign investment and fell short of providing a satisfactory economic recovery (*ibid.*; Wynia 1978, 96–98). The president's massive unpopularity and lackluster performance strengthened the campaign for Perón's return. The military capitalized on Frondizi's failure as justification to oust him in March 1962 and call for new general elections to be held in July of the following year (Ascher 1984, 193).

With Peronists banned from the ballot and the UCRI delegitimized by Frondizi's disastrous performance, the UCRP candidate, Arturo Illia, won the 1963 election with a meager 26 percent of the popular vote (Wynia 1978, 112). Because he rose under more favorable economic conditions than Frondizi, Illia managed to enact more popular expansionary policies. In stark contrast to Perón, however, the new president enacted these policies in a cautious and gradual manner, “reinforcing the . . . impression that Argentines had elected a man with no program at all” (*ibid.*, 116). Moreover, because Peronists viewed his election as illegitimate, Illia failed to earn the support of the movement's rank and file, even though his redistributive policies produced modest, short-term improvements in their wages. To make matters worse for the president, his policies alienated the country's other major actors, including agricultural and industrial elites. Thus, when labor protests erupted in 1964 and 1965, the military intervened again, removing yet another unpopular president with a coup in 1966 (*ibid.*, 122–27).

The failures of Frondizi and Illia strengthened Perón's reputation as the only leader capable of effectively governing Argentina. To sustain his favorable position, however, Perón also had to minimize threats from within his

movement, which had gathered strength during Illia's presidency. Most importantly, Augusto Vandor, an experienced union leader, sought to build a routinized Peronist party during this period that would sustain the movement's traditional, pro-labor policies while leaving the founder behind (James 1988, 162). A passionate defender of Argentine workers and a pragmatic leader, Vandor would likely have protected Peronist followers' interests more effectively than Perón himself (McGuire 1997, 133). Yet the founder deliberately sabotaged Vandor's attempts to carry Peronism forward without him. To do so, Perón empowered the radical left wing of his movement – the Revolutionary Peronist Movement – a faction with which he had very little in common ideologically (Gillespie 1982, 42; McGuire 1997, 91). While emboldening this radical branch, Perón constantly shifted his support between it and the labor branch, the latter of which was sympathetic to Vandor, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. This “deliberate strategic ambiguity” incited chaos and violence between the factions, compromising the well-being of Perón's own followers (Gillespie 1982, 45). Crucially, however, it also safeguarded his personal control over his movement, further demonstrating his preference for charismatic power over programmatic substance.

In short, chaos, fragmentation, and instability defined the interregnum between Perón's ouster in 1955 and his return to power in 1973. Both opposition and neo-Peronist parties failed to grow roots and attract sufficient political support to establish a stable, democratic party system. Instead, the military, obsessed with erasing Peronism while unconfident in other parties' capacity to govern, regularly interfered. In fact, Frondizi and Illia, the only democratically elected presidents who served during the period, were ousted by military coups; the third, Héctor Cámpora, served only as a stand-in candidate for Perón and was replaced by the founder just months after his election in 1973 (Wynia 1978, 14).

I argue that citizens' charismatic attachments to Perón, combined with the exiled leader's ongoing interference, helped sustain his image as the only person capable of rescuing the country from crisis and turmoil – even though he played a direct role in generating the upheaval. With his charisma intact, the triumphant Perón therefore returned to Argentina in 1973 to begin his third presidential term amid throngs of fervently loyal followers.

### 7.3.3 The Second Wave Rises: Perón's Brief Return to Power

#### 7.3.3.1 *Recharging Charismatic Attachments*

Like his first rise in the mid-1940s, Perón relied on his enduring personalistic appeal to return to power in 1973. In a conciliatory gesture, the military regime permitted the Peronist party – though not Perón himself – to participate in elections scheduled for that March. The regime invited the participation of the Peronist party in the hopes that “the ‘Perón myth’ would have eventually vanished during his long exile” (Ciria 1974, 30). As in 1955, however, the

military once again underestimated the depth of citizens' affective ties to their leader. By 1973, the charismatic founder had not just sustained the devotion of his original followers, but he had also grown his base by incorporating middle-class and leftist activists (Page 1983, 453). While the interests and values of these new supporters starkly contrasted with those of his working-class rank and file, he appealed to all of them: to his traditional followers, he symbolized a return to the "golden age" of his prior rule; to his new constituents, he appeared as an inspirational and revolutionary figure, "almost a local version of Mao or Fidel" (Ciria 1974, 29–30). Regardless of their interpretations, however, all of Perón's supporters became convinced that their vision of the future required his *personal* resumption of power.

### 7.3.3.2 *Reasserting Hegemonic Authority*

Harnessing the faith of his followers, Perón revived his movement in typical charismatic fashion. His handpicked proxy, Héctor Cámpora, ran in the March 1973 presidential election. A "staunch supporter and personal representative of Perón," Cámpora posed little threat to the founder and vowed to immediately step down upon winning the election to restore Perón to power (Ciria 1974, 32). With Perón's blessing and the campaign slogan, "Cámpora to the presidency, Perón to power," the proxy candidate won in a landslide ("Triumph for Perón" 1973). True to his word, Cámpora welcomed Perón back to Argentina and stepped down from power in July, just four months after being elected. Perón won a newly scheduled election that September with 62 percent of the vote and, on October 12, greeted masses of jubilant – if internally divided – followers from the presidential palace (Page 1983, 477).

## 7.3.4 **The Second Wave Recedes: Death, Dictatorship, and the Return to Democracy**

### 7.3.4.1 *Policy Exhaustion*

As discussed earlier, Perón resumed the presidency after nearly two decades of exile by leaning on his charismatic authority and fighting attempts to destroy or institutionalize his movement. These efforts facilitated his comeback, but they also presented him with intractable challenges, including an unstable political situation, a disjointed movement, and a fragile economy. Perón temporarily sidestepped these issues by condemning the failures of the prior military regime and making vague promises to restore independence, prosperity, and social justice to Argentina through projects such as the "Social Pact" and the "Reconstruction and Liberation Project" (Ciria 1974, 34; Wynia 1978, 252). Given the perilous state of the economy and explosive divisions – not only within his movement, but also across other sectors of society including opposition parties, the revolutionary left, and the military – his grand gestures would not last long. Fortunately for his legacy, he died before disaster ensued, just nine months after assuming office (Pion-Berlin 1983, 54). Rather than blaming him

for the dark period that followed, his devotees sustained their glorified perceptions of their beloved *Conductor*.

As described in Chapter 6, during Isabel Perón's short-lived and disastrous presidency from July 1974 to March 1976, she reinforced her husband and predecessor's dysfunctional economic policies while using repression to quell popular dissent. Subsequently, the military ousted her and instilled a brutal dictatorship under General Jorge Videla. Over the next six years, the military dictatorship increased state-sponsored repression to horrific levels in its quest to "annihilate" the revolutionary left – and anyone even remotely associated with the left – in the name of reestablishing order (McGuire 1997, 170–71). The regime "disappeared" tens of thousands of civilians, killed thousands more outright, and pushed more than two million others to flee the country (Haberma 2015).<sup>5</sup> Economically, Videla sought to stabilize the country by demobilizing the working class and aggressively reenacting a free-market model to curb inflation and stimulate growth. Although these extreme measures led to a modest economic recovery during the first three years of the dictatorship, the regime – despite claiming to be a beacon of economic discipline and efficiency – indulged in "gargantuan borrowing" and destroyed industrial productivity, leading to widespread implosion of financial institutions (McGuire 1997, 171–73). The resulting economic collapse, combined with a last-ditch effort to shore up political legitimacy through a failed invasion of the British Falkland Islands, forced the regime to usher in a caretaker government and restore democratic elections in 1983 (*ibid.*, 178–79).

#### 7.3.4.2 *Resistance to Routinization*

During the military dictatorship, Peronism fragmented even more than during the founder's eighteen-year exile. While the regime's unspeakable acts of torture suppressed the Peronist left, rifts grew in the movement's more traditional, union-centered base due to disagreements regarding how to confront the dictatorship. Some union leaders, such as Saúl Ubaldini of the beer workers' union and Roberto García of the taxi workers' union, adopted a combative approach in which they led general strikes and openly expressed their opposition. Others, including Lorenzo Miguel of the steelworkers' union and Jorge Triaca of the plastic workers' union, chose a more conciliatory path that involved negotiation with the regime in hopes of securing a role in the eventual transition to democracy (*ibid.*, 173–74). Like the Peronists, opposition parties also suffered repression and fragmentation, albeit to a lesser extent. Similar to union leaders, Radical politicians disagreed about how to deal with the military regime. For example, UCRP leader Ricardo Balbín endeavored to cooperate with the military in order to gain a more prominent

<sup>5</sup> The "Disappeared" refers to the citizens whom the military captured, clandestinely tortured, and often murdered.

role in a transitional regime, whereas Raúl Alfonsín openly opposed the regime throughout its six-year tenure (*ibid.*, 177).

Despite these divisions, the military dictatorship's unabashed brutality and failed economic policies ultimately caused the regime to collapse, motivating Peronist and UCR leaders to form a united front to facilitate a transition to democracy. This coalition, dubbed the *multipartidaria*, played an active role in scheduling elections for October 1983 (Corach 2011). Due to the deep fissures within Peronism, which had intensified due to the absence of its charismatic founder and the unrelenting repression of the dictatorship, the movement failed to present a compelling candidate for the election. Instead, its fractious leaders nominated Ítalo Luder – an unintimidating and perfunctory lawyer with no connection to the movement's rank and file (Madsen and Snow 1991, 139).

In contrast to the behind-the-scenes politicking of Peronist leaders who all coveted the presidency, the UCR held a transparent, democratic primary election in which candidates had the opportunity to appeal directly to voters. Thus, unlike their Peronist counterparts, UCR leaders overcame internal divisions and coalesced behind Raúl Alfonsín (McGuire 1997, 183). An inspiring leader who promised to restore light, hope, and democracy to the country after years of repression and darkness, Alfonsín swept Luder in the elections and became Argentina's first post-transition president.<sup>6</sup>

As the first post-transition president, Alfonsín attempted to launch a new political movement, which he dubbed the “Third Historical Movement,” that would rise above the existing parties and movements including the UCR and Peronism (Zelaznik 2013, 424). At the time, many of Alfonsín's supporters thought he would succeed: endowed with his own charismatic appeal, he seemed to personally embody the light, hope, and democracy that Argentines so desperately craved after several years of darkness, turmoil, and repression.<sup>7</sup> However, as I will illustrate subsequently, Alfonsín, like many leaders before him, underestimated the resilience of Peronism. Ultimately, this oversight foiled his ambitions to start a new movement and led to his premature departure from the presidency.

Specifically, although problems of leaderless fragmentation prevented Peronism from returning to power during this period, the Peronists capitalized on their enduring influence over the working class to obstruct Alfonsín's capacity to govern. While unable to return society to the “glory days” under Perón, these politicians could mobilize Peronist workers to undermine the new administration by highlighting how Alfonsín's proposals to stabilize the economy – which included scaling back benefits Perón had granted decades earlier – betrayed the founder's legacy. Using this logic, Peronism's otherwise divided union leaders, including Ubaldini and Triaca, joined forces to oppose the new

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with María Patricia Vischi, October 7, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Vischi.

president's reforms. In fact, over the course of Alfonsín's term, these leaders coordinated thirteen general, nationwide strikes (McGuire 1997, 200). These tactics greatly hindered Alfonsín's success and played a crucial role in the leader's premature exit from power in July 1989, several months before the official completion of his term.

In short, while no leader emerged as Perón's clear heir in 1983, the movement's capacity to mobilize followers and obstruct opposing forces sustained its political relevance throughout Alfonsín's presidency. Perhaps more importantly, by inhibiting the leadership capacities of Alfonsín, the rebellious behavior of union leaders throughout the 1980s created a deep crisis of governability and demonstrated to Peronist followers the inability of non-Peronists to meet their needs. In turn, the desperate economic and political circumstances that had worsened during Alfonsín's presidency established a ripe opportunity for a new charismatic savior to arise, pick up Perón's baton, and save the people from their distress.

### 7.3.5 The Third Wave Rises: Carlos Menem

#### 7.3.5.1 *Recharging Charismatic Attachments*

As described in Chapter 6, Carlos Menem rose toward the end of Alfonsín's chaotic presidency to restore Peronism to power and – temporarily – become Argentina's preeminent leader. A self-starter seeking power in the midst of a terrible crisis, Menem embraced a personalistic style of leadership that “echoed Perón's,” revitalizing citizens' emotional attachments to the movement and restoring their faith in its promise to bring them peace and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> As I will describe subsequently, Menem's charisma played a crucial role in reviving Peronism and establishing his authority. But, just as with the first two waves of the movement under Perón, Menem's personalistic tactics ultimately led to his downfall and yet another period of tumultuous crisis.

In contrast to his failed predecessor, Menem secured the loyalty of Peronist citizens in part because he portrayed himself as a genuine successor of Perón. He boasted a lifelong record as a devout Peronist: he had participated in the party as a young activist during Perón's second presidential term, endured five years of imprisonment under the military dictatorship, and served three terms as the Peronist governor of the rural Western province of La Rioja (McGuire 1997, 207–8). Leveraging these strong connections to the movement, he rose above political infighting and portrayed himself as uniquely capable of picking up the founder's baton and restoring the people's faith in the movement's promise of redemption.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Menem distanced himself from Alfonsín's failed administration; triumphed over Cafiero in the 1988 Peronist primary; handily

<sup>8</sup> McGuire (1997, 212); author interview with Kohan, November 14, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Kohan, November 14, 2016.

defeated the UCR candidate, Eduardo Angeloz, in the 1989 general election; and began his presidency backed by a powerful, emotionally charged base of supporters.

As president, Menem solidified his image as a charismatic savior by implementing daring reforms. Most prominently, his Convertibility Plan, which artificially fixed the Argentine peso to the US dollar, attacked and eventually ended hyperinflation, dramatically increasing the purchasing power of ordinary Argentines (see Chapter 6). Menem enacted the Plan in April 1991 after a cascade of neoliberal reforms that directly contradicted Perón's original, state-centered policies and far outpaced Alfonsín's proposed structural adjustment plans (Weyland 2002, 20–21).

While Menem's policies appeared to contradict those of Perón, I contend that his behavior was quintessentially Peronist, as he ended the crisis and provided the suffering masses with much-needed relief. Between 1990 and 1994, inflation dropped from 1,832 percent to 4 percent. Additionally, newly privatized public services – which had been hopelessly dysfunctional before Menem's rise – became efficient and affordable (McGuire 1997, 219–20). Thanks to Menem's neoliberal policies, the country achieved sustained economic growth and Argentines enjoyed a higher quality of life than they had experienced in decades. In short, while his audacious programs horrified the principled leaders of the center-left Peronist Renovation – the coalition dedicated to institutionalizing the movement – Menem's emotional appeal and extraordinary performance during his first presidential term enabled him to revive the movement in all its personalistic glory.

### 7.3.5.2 *Concentrating Hegemonic Authority*

Capitalizing on his success, Menem followed Perón's model by deepening his control over politics. First, the self-starter conquered the Peronist party by marginalizing prominent leaders of the Renovation and replacing Cafiero as president of the PJ. He also filled his cabinet with trusted friends rather than experienced party officials. For example, he appointed three individuals to important posts based on personal rather than party connections: Roberto Dromi (Minister of Public Works), Alberto Kohan (Chief of Staff), and Eduardo Bauzá (Minister of the Interior). He also selected several previously anti-Peronist leaders as prominent advisers, including Alvaro Alsogaray and Octavio Frigerio, further demonstrating that he was not beholden to party officials (*ibid.*, 242).<sup>10</sup> To deepen his control over the PJ, Menem personally endorsed political outsiders ranging from celebrities to speedboat racers to corporate CEOs for legislative and gubernatorial positions rather than supporting party leaders (*ibid.*, 242–43). In doing so, he stifled the efforts of many to

<sup>10</sup> Prior to being appointed by Menem, Alsogaray was a longtime member of the conservative party, Union of the Democratic Center (UCeDé), while Frigerio belonged to the Movement for Development and Integration (MID), an offshoot of Frondizi's UCRI (McGuire 1997, 242).

routinize the PJ, coopted important opposition leaders, and strengthened Peronism's personalistic nature.

In addition to overpowering parties within and beyond the Peronist movement, Menem undermined political institutions that constrained his authority. For example, he bypassed the legislature to enact hundreds of emergency decrees that ensured the swift implementation of his free-market reforms, which many politicians found worrisome and irresponsible. By the end of 1993, he enacted over three hundred such decrees – about ten times more than the country had experienced over the previous 140 years combined (*ibid.*, 256).<sup>11</sup> Similar to Perón, he also sidestepped legal challenges to his executive power by increasing the number of Supreme Court justices from five to nine and hand-picking loyalists to fill the new vacancies. To reinforce his image of indomitable popularity, he meddled in electoral rules to benefit his administration, adding twenty-three new seats to the Chamber of Deputies representing sympathetic districts and, most prominently, pushing through a new constitution to permit his reelection in 1995 (*ibid.*, 255–57). Through these tactics, Menem successfully overcame constraints imposed by the other branches of government and solidified his charismatic power in a manner reminiscent of the founder.

Lastly, to ensure his personal control over the state, Menem allowed corruption to proliferate throughout his administration and often orchestrated illicit activities. When scandals erupted involving his personal advisors and other loyal politicians, he responded by demonizing the press for unjustly accusing these individuals (*ibid.*, 259). Crucially, thanks in large part to his charismatic image and close attachments with Peronist followers, the accusations of corruption failed to reach Menem personally during his presidency. As Kohan, Menem's Chief of Staff, stated in an interview with the author, opposition leaders "accused Menem of everything ... and even then, we continued to win elections. They still haven't been able to prove anything."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the president remained popular and exercised largely unchecked power throughout his first and much of his second presidential term.

To recapitulate, like Perón, Menem harnessed the fervent loyalty of Peronist followers and the early success of his economic reforms to achieve hegemonic control over the political system. As with the charismatic founder, his direct appeals to the popular sectors helped catapult him into power. Then, as president, Menem used his personalistic authority to reinforce his heroic image and temporarily provide his supporters with determined reprieve from economic crisis. Ultimately, Menem's actions undermined his followers' long-term programmatic interests, destroyed the efforts of the Renovation leaders to routinize Peronism, and weakened political institutions vital to the consolidation of democracy. Nevertheless, Menem's charismatic leadership strengthened

<sup>11</sup> By the end of his two presidencies, Menem had enacted a total of 545 emergency decrees (Capriata 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Kohan, July 20, 2016.

Peronism by reenergizing the followers' enthusiasm for the movement and causing them to worship him as its new chief. Thus, while his impressive reign would not last, I argue that it played a crucial role in perpetuating the personalistic nature and spasmodic trajectory of the movement.

### 7.3.6 The Third Wave Recedes: Menem's Fall and The Convertibility Crisis

#### 7.3.6.1 *Policy Exhaustion*

During Menem's second presidential term (1995–99), the structural deficiencies of his audacious policies began to emerge. In particular, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the unsustainable nature of the Convertibility Plan, as the official value of the peso far exceeded its real worth. While Menem refused to publicly acknowledge this disturbing reality, anxiety rose among ordinary Argentines, whose livelihood had become dependent on the artificial exchange rate (Weyland 2002, 187). Adding to this fear were the social consequences of Menem's neoliberal reforms, which included growing inequality and unemployment (Gantman 2012, 338–41). Although the Peronist rank and file continued to view Menem favorably, these problems directly impacted their lives and began to erode his reputation as a heroic problem-solver.

Unable to run for a third presidential term in 1999, Menem was forced to yield the Peronist candidacy to Eduardo Duhalde. A programmatically principled leader and longtime rival of Menem's, Duhalde enjoyed the backing of Peronist Renovation leaders who had grown frustrated by the president's hegemonic behavior and his waning performance (Weyland 2002, 194). Yet, Menem's influence over the movement remained significant. Furthermore, many of the outgoing president's conservative supporters backed his former Economy Minister, Domingo Cavallo. This fragmentation deprived Duhalde of valuable votes and ultimately cost him the election. Thus, Fernando de la Rúa, a dreadfully uninspiring candidate aptly nicknamed "baby pacifier" (*el chupete*), came to power backed by a loose alliance of anti-Peronist parties (*ibid.*).<sup>13</sup>

As with the recession of the first two Peronist waves in 1955 and 1974, Menem's delicate economic and political balance collapsed upon his departure from power in 1999. Throughout his presidency, he had enforced political cohesion and economic stability from the top-down using his unmediated charismatic authority. His sudden absence, combined with the exhaustion of his shortsighted policies, ushered in a chaotic period without a leader to guide the way. Indeed, the virtually powerless de la Rúa failed to take charge of the situation upon rising to office and thus resigned in December 2001

<sup>13</sup> The Alliance supporting de la Rúa's candidacy consisted of the UCR, a center-left coalition called Frepaso, and several smaller parties (Weyland 2002, 194–95).

(Weyland 2002, 195). The combination of economic collapse and feeble leadership de-legitimized the political system and led citizens to riot in the streets (Krauss 2001).

In the eleven days between de la Rúa's resignation and Duhalde's appointment as interim president, Argentina endured a profound leadership crisis in which five presidents rose and fell. Remarkably, the military did not intervene during this tumultuous period – a testament to the country's commitment to a minimal level of democracy as well as its strong aversion toward violence. Nevertheless, the crisis revealed the disintegrated state of the party system and demonstrated how little the country's political institutions had progressed over the previous decade.

In terms of political parties, the UCR grew even weaker during the 1999–2003 period than it had been when Alfonsín stepped down from the presidency prematurely in 1989 (Zelaznik 2013, 425). The party's inability to compete in the 1999 elections without crafting an alliance with several other parties was an illustration of its frailty; De La Rúa's feeble presidency and resignation in 2001 only exacerbated the party's failure to thrive. Consequently, in the wake of the crisis, the UCR would play only a minor role in stabilizing the country and would never again present a stand-alone candidate for presidential elections (Roberts 2007, 12).

### 7.3.6.2 *Resistance to Routinization*

Peronism remained divided in the aftermath of Menem's presidency. For his part, Duhalde led a large group of party stalwarts against Menem and his neoliberal policies. The rival's faction had begun to accumulate strength in 1997, as Menem's performance had begun to wane. Yet Duhalde's group encountered several obstacles that prevented it from assuming control over the party. One obstacle is that, as previously mentioned, Cavallo also ran for president under a separate ticket in a blatant attempt to split the PJ (Cassese 1999). In addition, Menem retained control over important factions of the PJ, hindering the efforts of his Peronist opponents to dethrone him. Thus, while constitutionally barred from running for a third presidential term in 1999, Menem managed to get himself reelected as president of the PJ until 2003 (Ventura 1999).<sup>14</sup>

When Duhalde scheduled presidential elections for 2003, the PJ refrained from endorsing an official candidate, reflecting the lack of cohesion within the party. As a result, three leaders with Peronist affiliations ran on separate tickets: Menem; Néstor Kirchner, the Governor of Santa Cruz and Duhalde's preferred candidate; and Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, the Governor of San Luis. Notably, despite running independently, the three candidates did not attempt to break

<sup>14</sup> Duhalde challenged the legality of the PJ internal elections, but the Menem-backed Supreme Court upheld the results, securing Menem's place as the party president (Ventura 1999).

away from Peronism and start new parties. Instead, each depicted himself as a true successor of Perón while targeting the others as frauds threatening to denigrate the founder's legacy. Most explicitly, Menem claimed throughout his campaign to be Perón's most faithful successor. He even declared during his campaign finale in the iconic River Plate Stadium in the Federal Capital, "Carlos Menem is the authentic and best disciple of the Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón and of Eva Perón" (Sued 2003).

Although Kirchner downplayed his ties to the PJ in order to distance himself from Menem, he also implicitly connected himself to the charismatic founder. For example, just as Menem claimed to reinvigorate Perón's "productive revolution" during his 1989 campaign, Kirchner promised an economic "model of production and work" – a clear association with the founder's original platform (Ybarra 2003). Similarly, while less popular than Menem or Kirchner, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá titled his electoral coalition after the founders' movement, "National and Popular Movement," and referenced Perón's promise of salvation by titling his caravan "The March of Dreams" (Colonna 2003). In short, while the infighting between Peronist leaders kept the PJ fragmented and weak during the 1999–2003 period, each candidate's efforts to associate himself with the founder underscore the ongoing influence of Perón's charismatic legacy.

In addition to weak parties, political institutions during this period remained frail. The judicial branch remained deeply politicized and the legislature was virtually powerless, as evidenced by its failure to implement much-needed economic reforms and prevent the 2001 collapse (Ventura 1999). With weakling De La Rúa at the helm, the executive office also lost its decisive authority. Given the utter disempowerment of the three major branches of government, the State had little capacity to address the crisis, causing citizens throughout the country to become thoroughly disillusioned with the government and detached from politics in the ensuing years (Quiroga 2005, 322–23).

Despite the discredited status of political parties and institutions, however, Peronism sustained its reputation as the only force capable of governing the country during the transitional period from Menem to Kirchner (Mora y Araujo 2011; Ollier 2015). In fact, I contend that Argentina recovered from the 2001 collapse primarily due to the ongoing legitimacy of Peronism and the strength of the chief executive office relative to other political institutions. Paradoxically, while undermining democratic institutions, the movement's popular legitimacy and its monopoly over executive power saved Argentina from worse fates. Moreover, while the 2001 crisis made citizens feel utterly fed up with politics, it also reinforced their perception of Peronism as the only force capable of rescuing the country from desperate circumstances. Thus, even while rejecting contemporary politicians, Peronist followers sustained their attachments to the movement and their faith in the founder's promise to deliver salvation. As I will discuss in the next section, it is for this reason that the

followers would come to worship another set of charismatic saviors soon after the crisis, restoring Peronism to its position of power.

### 7.3.7 The Fourth Wave Rises: Néstor and Cristina Kirchner

#### 7.3.7.1 *Recharging Charismatic Attachments*

As discussed in the previous chapter, Néstor Kirchner won the 2003 presidential election thanks in large part to Menem's departure from the race, combined with the wave of economic recovery that Duhalde had initiated in the previous year. Taking personal credit for the reestablishment of prosperity, Néstor – and subsequently, his wife, Cristina – consolidated tremendous popularity and reinvigorated followers' emotional attachments, thereby ushering in the fourth wave of Peronism.

Initially, the Kirchners tried to establish a unique movement that superseded (but still incorporated) Peronism. For example, Néstor responded to the PJ's refusal to endorse any candidate for the 2003 election by creating a new party label, Front for Victory (*Frente para la Victoria – FPV*), which he claimed would be a “transversal” coalition that would incorporate Peronist and non-Peronist actors alike. Julio Cobos, the Radical governor of Mendoza, also served as Cristina's vice president during her first presidential term (2007–11). Mora y Araujo (2011) indicates that the Kirchners initially pursued this strategy because, when Néstor rose to power, his control over Peronism was anything but guaranteed. Indeed, Néstor won the presidency with less than 23 percent of the vote; Menem, who had gained over 24 percent of the vote in the first round of the election, still enjoyed the loyalty of many Peronist followers. The Kirchners sought to strengthen their position by building a broader coalition that reached beyond Peronism and drew support from opposition groups, such as ideologically moderate and left-leaning Radicals like Cobos.

However, similar to Alfonsín's attempts to create a “Third Historical Movement” in the 1980s, the Kirchners' attempts to establish a new movement failed, causing them to double down on their Peronist identity. The leading couple's renewed embrace of Peronism occurred in large part because they resisted making concessions to the diverse members of the transversal coalition; in turn, the coalition members felt increasingly irritated and alienated by the Kirchners' domineering style (Mora y Araujo 2011). Thus, as the Kirchners' joint administration progressed, their non-Peronist alliances fell apart, especially during Cristina's presidency (Calvo and Victoria Murillo 2012, 151; Mora y Araujo 2011).

At the same time, Néstor and Cristina's popularity among Peronist followers increased substantially over the course of their joint rule due to Argentina's impressive economic recovery as well as Menem's fading prominence (Mora y Araujo 2011). In an especially notable illustration of the Kirchners' newfound control over the movement, Cristina defeated Duhalde's wife, “Chiche,” in the

2005 senate race for the Province of Buenos Aires, arguably the most important Peronist stronghold in the country (Calvo and Victoria Murillo 2012, 161). As a result of their increasing dominance over Peronism and the defections of their Radical allies, the Kirchner era became widely perceived as a formidable new chapter of Peronism rather than an independent movement (Ollier 2015).

Interestingly, some scholars and Peronist activists insisted in interviews with the author that the Kirchners brought Peronism back to life using a programmatic approach: namely, by constructing a state-centered, nationalist economy similar to Perón's original platform.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Santiago Cafiero, a grandson of Antonio Cafiero who would become President Alberto Fernández's cabinet chief in 2019, stated that, whereas Menem claimed the Peronist label through superficial "iconography," the Kirchners resurrected the programmatic substance of Peronism through reinstating "concrete policies of state-centered economics and social redistribution."<sup>16</sup> Based on this reasoning, one might conclude that, in contrast to Menem, the Kirchners successfully transformed Peronism into the routinized, center-left party envisioned by Antonio Cafiero and other leaders of the Peronist Renovation a decade earlier.

Yet, as I argue subsequently, the Kirchners intentionally undermined others' attempts to routinize Peronism and strengthened the charismatic heart of the movement. They achieved this by adopting the same strategies that Perón and Menem utilized in the past to consolidate decisively personalistic authority. However, to distance themselves from Menem's tainted administration, they employed the strategies of charismatic leadership in reverse order: they began by enacting daring and initially successful programs, then embraced their roles as the heirs of Juan and Eva Perón.

Whereas Menem stressed his symbolic role as a Peronist before implementing bold reforms, Néstor kicked off his presidency by enacting audacious policies that produced extraordinary, though unsustainable, benefits. The outcomes of his daring reforms reenergized Peronist followers and secured the loyalty of new supporters from the lower and middle classes. His decision to repay Argentina's massive debt with the International Monetary Fund in one fell swoop in December 2005 exemplifies this approach. This astonishing initiative created a "climate of euphoria" across Argentina by instantaneously liberating the country from the "tutelage" of one of its most detested and powerful overlords ("Histórico: el país saldará en un solo pago la deuda con

<sup>15</sup> Author interview with Santiago Cafiero, Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers of Argentina under Alberto Fernández and grandson of Antonio Cafiero, July 5, 2016; author interview with Delfina Rossi, Peronist activist, former Director of the National Bank of Argentina, and daughter of Agustín Rossi, May 15, 2015; author interview with Macarena Kunkel, Peronist activist and daughter of Carlos Kunkel, April 19, 2016; and author interview with Juan Ernesto Gullo, son of Juan Carlos "Dante" Gullo, July 11, 2016. Cafiero, Rossi, Kunkel, and Gullo expressed similar views that the Kirchners managed to revive the (leftist) programmatic substance of Peronism and thus advanced efforts to routinize the movement.

<sup>16</sup> Author interview with Santiago Cafiero.

el FMI” 2005; Ollier 2015). Moreover, it cast Néstor in a heroic light and distinguished him from Menem, whom the public widely perceived as selling out to the IMF in the first place. The loan repayment accelerated the economic recovery, bringing about substantial increases in employment and wages, thereby causing Néstor’s popularity to skyrocket to 74 percent by July 2003 (Mora y Araujo 2011).

As president in subsequent years, Cristina implemented similar state-centered programs to display her own determination and capacity to transform Argentina. For example, in a bold move in 2008, she renationalized the pension system that Menem had privatized in 1993. She presented the decision as a radical effort to “protect our pensioners and our workers,” from the evils of Menem’s neoliberalism as well as the greedy interests of developed countries, “economic conglomerates,” and “large banks” (Arza 2012, 48–49; Datz 2012, 116). In reality, the policy revealed Cristina’s “political short-termism and executive strength,” and undermined “long-term concerns about the stability of the social security system” (Datz 2012, 101). However, the renationalization deepened the enthusiasm of her followers, greatly enhanced her control over the country’s fiscal resources, and enabled her to restructure and temporarily alleviate the country’s large and growing public debt. By the end of her presidency, 1.28 million Argentines received noncontributory pensions thanks to the reform (Nogueira 2015). In short, while complicating the country’s economic stability, this daring fiscal policy strengthened Cristina’s image as the common people’s central protagonist and proved her willingness to stand up on the world stage to defend her supporters against powerful enemies.<sup>17</sup>

Once they achieved impressive performance and distanced themselves from Menem, the Kirchners proceeded to portray themselves as symbolic reincarnations of Perón and Eva, thereby reviving the movement’s quasi-religious mystique. Néstor did this implicitly by portraying himself as the champion of Argentine workers (Wortman 2015). He also reanimated the cleavage Perón had emphasized between the privileged and the poor – a dimension of the Peronist narrative that Menem had downplayed. For example, he verbally attacked Menem, human rights abusers from the military dictatorship, and international financial institutions as selfish elites.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, he praised Argentine workers, the progressive middle class, youths, and the poor masses as model citizens (Wortman 2015).

When Cristina rose to power in 2007, she reinforced this cleavage between the “haves” and “have-nots” and explicitly embodied Evita’s persona as the mother of the impoverished masses.<sup>19</sup> Throughout her presidency, she mingled

<sup>17</sup> Author interview with anonymous communications strategist from the Kirchner administration, April 6, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Author interview with Corach.

<sup>19</sup> Wortman 2015; author interview with anonymous communications strategist from the Kirchner administration, April 6, 2016.



FIGURE 7.2. Cristina Kirchner announces a new bill in the “Evita Room” of the presidential palace, 2012

with poor Argentines during public acts, used passionate rhetoric to defend the “people” against the malevolent upper class, and depicted herself as personally responsible for redistributing wealth to more virtuous Argentines via her social programs. She introduced many such programs in the “Evita Room” of the presidential palace, with an image of the founder’s wife projected prominently behind her, as exemplified in Figure 7.2.

However, it was Néstor’s sudden death from a heart attack in October 2010 that would catalyze the Kirchners’ most powerful symbolic connection to the Peróns’ charismatic legacy. Following this tragedy, Cristina doubled down on her efforts to create an “idealized image” of her husband that explicitly associated both of them with the founders (Cherny 2014, 156). For example, following Néstor’s death, images proliferated of Cristina and her late husband mimicking the founders’ passionate embrace during massive campaign rallies (see Figures 7.3 and 7.4). Cristina also publicly mourned Néstor’s death for an extensive period of time and continually referred to “Him” as Christ-like during the final years of her presidency, intensifying her allure as a brave and tenacious widow. And just as Perón immortalized Eva’s saintly image upon her tragic death, Cristina solidified Néstor’s charismatic legacy by incorporating his image into propaganda spread throughout the country; renaming streets, public buildings, and neighborhoods after him; and constantly referencing his extraordinary contributions to society (Cherny 2014, 156; Wortman 2015).



FIGURE 7.3. Cristina and Néstor Kirchner embrace



FIGURE 7.4. Juan and Eva Perón embrace

### 7.3.7.2 *Concentrating Hegemonic Authority*

Contrary to the hopes of some party activists and intellectuals, the Kirchners did not use their charismatic authority to oversee the construction of a leftist, institutionalized party. Rather, the leading couple seized control of the PJ and leveraged their powerful appeal to vanquish threats from the party's mid-level agents. Initially, Néstor adopted a conciliatory tone to win the support of diverse leaders within and beyond the PJ (Cherny 2014, 150; Mora y Araujo 2011). Yet, as he became more popular, these actors – especially Duhalde – quickly went from critical sources of support to obstacles threatening to hinder the Kirchners' consolidation of power. As these fragile political alliances grew more strained, the leading couple abandoned their transversal movement and established a new chapter of Peronism that they could define on their own terms (Dagatti 2013; Ollier 2015).

To establish a formidable and distinctly *Kirchnerista* chapter of Peronism, Néstor used his overwhelming popular support to demand loyalty from Peronist governors and legislators throughout the country. He also punished PJ leaders who questioned him by nominating parallel lists with his own candidates during the 2005 mid-term elections, and his nominees easily won thanks to their association with him. Furthermore, he weakened dissident Peronist governors by placing loyal mayors (*intendentes*) with new executive powers in the governors' districts. When some Peronist officials attempted to create a united front to oppose the president's aggressive behavior, he responded by pressuring influential members of the PJ to resign, effectively deactivating the party (Cherny 2014, 151–54). Finally, as previously mentioned, Cristina competed against Duhalde's wife, "Chiche," in the 2005 elections for senator of the Province of Buenos Aires. Unfortunately for Duhalde, his experience as a two-term governor of the province was no match for the Kirchners' popularity. Cristina emerged as the victorious senator, delivering a decisive blow to dissident Peronists, extinguishing Duhalde's influence, and paving the way for the Kirchners' undisputed control over the movement (*ibid.*; Mora y Araujo 2011; Ollier 2015).

Throughout the remainder of their combined presidencies, the Kirchners controlled the PJ in a hegemonic manner reminiscent of Menem and Perón. In fact, Néstor became president of the PJ in 2008, less than one year after handing the presidency of the nation to his wife. Time and again, the leading couple overcame internal threats to their power by deepening their direct connections with their adoring followers. Cristina continued to dominate the party on her own in the aftermath of her husband's death in October 2010, as evidenced by her landslide reelection in the following year. Before Néstor's death, a group of important Peronists had been plotting to wrest the party from the Kirchners' grasp (Cherny 2014, 155). Yet his death reinvigorated the followers' attachments to Cristina and glorified her husband as a martyr. Capitalizing on this emotional support, Cristina won reelection with an overwhelming 54 percent of the vote, smothering threats to her power from PJ challengers and enjoying supreme control over the movement and the country for several more years.

As the Kirchners established hegemonic authority over the nation and consolidated their influence over the Peronist movement, they also helped accelerate the fragmentation of opposition parties. Early on in his presidency, Néstor lured Radical leaders into his transversal coalition, thereby preventing the country's most influential opposition party from reestablishing a coherent bloc. This, combined with the UCR's implication in De La Rúa's humiliating (mis)management of the 2001 crisis, produced a precipitous decline in the UCR's representation in Congress (Zelaznik 2013). In fact, from 1999 to 2007, the party went from occupying eighty-five seats in the Chamber of Deputies and twenty seats in the Senate to forty seats in the Chamber and thirteen seats in the Senate (Ollier 2015).

When Cristina became president in 2007, her polemic style and actions fomented greater division between the government and the opposition. Most prominently, in 2008, she issued an emergency decree to increase export taxes on agricultural products, namely soybeans – an aggressive challenge to the country’s powerful agricultural sector. This bold gesture deepened the divide between her followers and opponents. For the former group, it strengthened her symbolic image as a true savior of the poor, as she promised to use the resulting funds to finance massive social programs. For the latter group, which included much of the middle class, the action was interpreted as a transparent ploy to enhance the power and influence of the Kirchners themselves (Calvo and Victoria Murillo 2012, 154).<sup>20</sup> The increased polarization that resulted from this debacle presented an important opportunity for opposition groups to form a united front against Cristina. However, even in the face of Cristina’s divisive leadership style, the opposition struggled to establish a cohesive force.

Finally, similar to their charismatic predecessors, the Kirchners weakened political institutions in the quest to sustain their personalistic authority. Like Menem, Néstor made ample use of emergency decrees to rapidly and single-handedly enact his policies – a total of 270 over the course of his presidency, an average of one every six days (Capriata 2008). While Cristina passed fewer than 50 decrees during her two presidential terms combined, she also used this tool strategically to enhance her charismatic image.<sup>21</sup> Like Perón, the Kirchners also interfered with the National Institute for Statistics and Census of the Republic (INDEC) to falsify statistics and mask the rising inflation that had resulted from their unsustainable state-centered economic policies. By 2012, the disparity between real and “official” inflation rates reached nearly 15 percentage points (Streb 2015). To strengthen their appearance as heroes defending the people against nefarious enemies, the Kirchners attacked media outlets critical of their administration and dominated public spaces with propaganda. Most prominently, in 2008 Cristina launched an all-out attack against the media giant *Clarín* for criticizing her efforts to increase taxes on the agricultural export sector to fund her social spending (Becerra 2015).

In sum, Peronism surged back to power under the Kirchners just as it had under Menem. Had the movement become institutionalized, this impressive comeback would have been unlikely. Yet its persistent charismatic nature enabled ambitious new leaders to restore its position as the country’s

<sup>20</sup> As protests erupted across the nation in opposition to Cristina’s decree, she attempted to have Congress enact a law to increase the export tax. However, in July 2008, the bill ultimately failed due to the tie-breaking vote of Cristina’s own vice president, Cobos (Calvo and Victoria Murillo 2012, 154).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Cristina’s attempt to increase agro-export-taxes in 2008 occurred through an emergency decree. Though she ultimately failed to enforce the new policy, the decree deepened the divide between her followers and opponents while increasing her symbolic image as a true savior among the poor.

predominant political force following the 2001 crisis. Specifically, citizens' enduring attachments to Peronism and their faith in the founder's mission of salvation caused them to crave a new hero capable of resolving their misery. The Kirchners capitalized on this opportunity to rise up and demonstrate their charismatic power. They oversaw an impressive economic recovery and boldly reversed Menem's neoliberal program through reinstating the economic nationalism and state interventionism of the past, reinvigorating citizens' intense nostalgia for Perón's golden age. Over time, the leaders also strategically reconstructed the movement's symbolic narrative by writing Menem out and depicting themselves as the contemporary manifestations of Perón and Eva. In doing so, Néstor and Cristina politically reactivated the followers' affective bonds, dominated the PJ, and weakened institutions that threatened their executive power.

As with Menem, this charismatic style of leadership allowed the Kirchners to consolidate hegemonic power – but only for a limited period of time. As I will illustrate in the next section, their shortsighted programs eventually imploded, compromising their heroic image. The Kirchners' collapse would once again usher in a period of leaderless fragmentation. Rather than destroying the movement, this recession, which would occur under non-Peronist president Mauricio Macri, would simply provide the opportunity for Cristina to stage an impressive comeback four years later, this time as vice president under Néstor's close confidant and Cabinet Chief, Alberto Fernández.

### 7.3.8 The Fourth Wave Recedes: Another Temporary Fall

#### 7.3.8.1 *Policy Exhaustion*

Over the course of Cristina's two presidential terms, unchecked social spending and protectionist economic policies resulted in increasing inflation, rising prices, and shortages of basic material goods (Damill and Frenkel 2015). Rather than addressing these problems, Cristina upheld the policies and used personalistic tactics to try to preserve her power. Speculation blossomed regarding her potential plans to legalize "re-reelection," which would enable her to serve a third presidential term (Rebossio 2012). Meanwhile, she blamed the economic struggles on "evil" opponents including speculators, international financial institutions, and private corporations (Wortman 2015). She also denied the severity of the looming crisis, distorted inflation statistics, further increased social spending, and relentlessly spread propaganda in praise of her administration's progress, which she came to label "The Victorious Decade" (*La Década Ganada*).

As Cristina's second presidency unfolded, it became increasingly difficult to sustain the illusion of prosperity with these stopgap measures. Moreover, in large part due to her declining performance, her plans for "re-reelection" failed, forcing her to step down in 2015 (Gilbert 2015). As with Menem in 1999, the combination of growing economic woes and the charismatic leader's inability

to remain in executive power caused the Peronist movement to recede from power once again.

Due to economic deterioration and Cristina's looming departure, Peronism once again suffered a crisis of fragmentation. The 2015 elections revealed these internal divisions. Cristina reluctantly endorsed Daniel Scioli, the lackluster Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires and Menem's original protégé, as the PJ candidate (Raszewski 2015). As in 2003, two additional Peronist candidates ran on independent tickets: Sergio Massa, a prominent national deputy from the Province of Buenos Aires and Cristina's former cabinet chief, and Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, the governor of San Luis and perennial presidential hopeful.

Similar to 1999, the fragmentation of Peronism greatly facilitated the opposition. Despite their ongoing struggle to unite, opposition groups managed to coalesce around a single candidate: Mauricio Macri, the center-right, wealthy businessman and Governor of the Federal Capital. Macri won and stepped into the presidency, backed by an ideologically variegated, seven-party coalition called "*Cambíemos*" (Let's Change), whose sole unifying foundation was its opposition to Cristina. Notably, Macri won in the second round of the election.<sup>22</sup> In the first round, he won a mere 30 percent of the vote; in contrast, the Peronists won a combined 61 percent (about 38.5 percent for Scioli, 20.5 percent for Massa, and 2 percent for Rodríguez Saá). While Peronism clearly remained the country's most popular political force, its internal divisions permitted Macri to participate in a runoff against Scioli, in which the non-Peronist won by two percentage points. In short, Macri owed his narrow victory to Peronists disillusioned with the Kirchner regime who refused to support her weakling successor.

### 7.3.8.2 *Resistance to Routinization*

Macri broke with historical precedent by becoming the first non-Peronist president to complete a full term in office (2015–19) since Perón's first electoral victory in 1946. Nonetheless, his presidency was marked by struggle and controversy, in large part because the crisis he inherited from his predecessor worsened substantially under his watch. By the end of his term, inflation had soared to 50 percent, GDP had shrunk by over three percent, and his approval dropped from a high of 62 percent after the 2017 mid-term election to a low of 28 percent in 2019 (Gillespie and Do Rosario 2019; Murillo and Rodrigo Zarazaga 2020). Therefore, Macri lost his October 2019 bid for reelection by a full eight points to the Peronist presidential candidate, Alberto Fernández, whom Cristina chose as her running mate (with Cristina as vice president) just

<sup>22</sup> The 1994 Constitution of Argentina requires that, in presidential elections, the first-place candidate win either 45 percent of the popular vote or 40–44 percent of the popular vote *and* defeat the runner-up candidate by at least 10 percentage points. Otherwise, the top two candidates must compete in a second round.

three months prior to the election. In short, while Macri temporarily overcame enormous challenges to assemble a successful non-Peronist coalition and complete his presidential term, his weak leadership – marked by his glaring inability to address the worsening economic crisis – ultimately paved the way for Peronism's fifth resurgence.

As with the presidencies of Alfonsín and De La Rúa, I argue that the persistent, charismatic nature of Peronism severely impacted Macri's leadership potential and contributed substantially to his political demise. Even while out of power during Macri's presidency, Peronism continued to shape citizen's expectations for a strong leader to provide a heroic resolution to the growing crisis. Yet Macri's non-Peronist background, coupled with his unwillingness and inability to adopt the personalistic style typical of Peronist leaders, prevented him from filling this role. Instead of working to establish a charismatic image, the new president endeavored to project a principled, business-like style. Indeed, while he held influential political roles in the past – most importantly, as the Chief of Government (equivalent to Governor) of the City of Buenos Aires – he leaned on his credentials as a civil engineer and businessman rather than portraying himself as a talented and inspirational leader in his own right. Throughout his campaign and presidency, he also openly criticized the “hyperpresidentialism and . . . polarizing style” of Peronist leaders, namely Cristina, and depicted himself as the humble manager of a “team” of bureaucrats (Lupu 2016, 47–48). Members of Macri's political administration insisted that this technocratic approach, which intentionally downplayed any emotional connection between the president and the citizenry, would help the president differentiate himself from his melodramatic predecessor and enhance his capacity to govern.<sup>23</sup>

However, instead of strengthening his image, Macri's strategy of depersonalization demonstrated his grave underestimation of the affective power of the Peronist identity, which hinges on citizens' deeply emotional bonds to charismatic leaders. Thus, although the president believed his so-called de-dramatization of power would inspire Argentines to invest in a more “horizontal” and egalitarian concept of leadership, his approach appeared to many as a brazen attempt to erase the legacies of Argentina's most beloved heroes – Perón above all (Rodríguez and Touzon 2020, 55, 70). In other words, by belittling the charismatic style of past leaders, especially Perón and the Kirchners, Macri and his team of technocrats (perhaps unknowingly) insulted the hopes and dreams that many citizens felt those leaders had fiercely defended (Rodríguez 2019). Consequently, Macri failed to connect on an emotional level with ordinary Argentines and fell short of their expectations of strong leadership.

<sup>23</sup> Author interview with Soledad Planes, polling adviser to Cabinet Chief Marcos Peña, June 21, 2016.

In addition to denying the symbolic power of Peronism, Macri enacted lukewarm policies rather than providing bold and decisive action to confront the economic crisis he inherited from his predecessor. Ironically, during his campaign, he vowed to end poverty, inflation, and corruption while jumpstarting Argentina's economy – audacious promises not unlike those of Peronist heroes. Yet, as president, he lacked the confidence and support to enact bold structural adjustments and provide the swift relief that many Argentines expected (Kovalski 2019). His cautious approach unfolded into a “meandering road to stability and growth” rather than bringing about miraculous recovery (Sturzenegger 2019). Then, in 2018, the Turkish debt crisis and a terrible drought exacerbated the recession (Kovalski 2019). Desperate to resolve the situation, the president turned to the International Monetary Fund – the most detested institution in Argentina – for help, securing the largest loan in history, at US\$5.7 billion; in exchange, he promised to enact much stricter structural adjustment measures (Murillo and Rodrigo Zarazaga 2020, 129). By this time, Argentines had lost faith in his capacity to rescue them from crisis. They also felt betrayed by his decision to sell the country out to the IMF and suffered from the painful adjustment measures.

Similar to his non-Peronist predecessors, Macri's weak leadership reinforced the maxim that only Peronist leaders are capable of governing the country. His presidency strengthened the cleavage between Peronists and anti-Peronists, injecting Peronism with a much-needed boost of legitimacy. As the “Macrisis” worsened during the final two years of his presidency, the fragile unity of his non-Peronist coalition eroded substantially (Rapoza 2019). Meanwhile, the ideologically heterogeneous array of Peronist leaders grew increasingly motivated to “put aside their differences and coalesce” (Murillo and Rodrigo Zarazaga 2020, 126).

In short, as with Alfonsín and De La Rúa decades earlier, the fall of Peronism in 2015 enabled Macri, a non-Peronist, to rise to power. At the same time, the charismatic ethos of the movement once again largely precluded the non-Peronist from becoming a successful leader. Indeed, Macri's inability and unwillingness to emotionally connect with Peronist-identifying citizens or miraculously resolve the economic crisis through bold, unilateral action set him up for failure and paved the way for Peronism's impressive comeback.

### 7.3.9 The Fifth Wave Rises: Fernández and Fernández

Energized by Macri's disastrous presidency, the fragmented Peronists managed to reunite and take back the presidency in 2019. To achieve this, Cristina positioned herself as vice presidential candidate with Alberto Fernández, her husband's ideologically moderate cabinet chief who had defected from her in 2008, at the head of the ticket. This cunning political maneuver enabled the movement's two major factions – one led by Cristina and the other by her defectors – to unify under a new coalition, “Front for All” (*Frente de Todos*).

In contrast to Macri's narrow, second-round win over Scioli in 2015, Fernández enjoyed an overwhelming victory in the first round of the 2019 election, with 48 percent of the vote to Macri's 40 percent. The Peronists also swept the gubernatorial and senate elections, gaining the support of twenty of twenty-four governors and forty-three of seventy-two senators (Murillo and Rodrigo Zarazaga 2020, 132).

At the time of writing in September 2020, Alberto Fernández faces several challenges, including the ongoing economic recession, yawning fiscal deficit, novel coronavirus pandemic, and ideological divisions within its own ranks. However, as with previous Peronist leaders, his position at the head of both the charismatic movement and the country has enabled him to use these conditions of crisis as a launchpad to exert strong, personalistic leadership. Already, he has demonstrated his potential to achieve this. Most importantly, he has confronted the pandemic with decisive policies, including a strict, months-long quarantine. While the economic consequences of the pandemic could be catastrophic, some analysts speculate that the health crisis grants the new president greater leeway to work with (or stop paying) the country's creditors (Mander 2020). Moreover, Fernández's policies have slowed the spread of the virus far more than in neighboring countries, earning him international praise and elevating his approval by more than twenty points, from 56.8 percent in December 2019 to 78 percent in April 2020, according to national polling firm Trespuntozero (Horwitz 2020).

In addition to increasing his popularity, Fernández's courageous response to the pandemic has enabled him to exert greater control over the Peronist movement. In particular, while some wondered during the presidential campaign whether Cristina would use him as a puppet to exert her own power (Jourdan and Raszewski 2019), it has become clear that his political capital far exceeds her own (Di Giorgio 2020). Indeed, like Menem in 2003, Cristina continues to command the fervent support of certain groups – but her disapproval ratings consistently outweigh her approval ratings, the latter of which stood at a mere 27.5 percent as of August 2020 (Mander 2020). In contrast, Alberto's approval has soared since he became president. While his numbers have receded somewhat since the peak of the pandemic in April, at well over 60 percent they remain higher than that of any other politician in the country (Guadalupe 2020). And whereas Cristina remains a divisive figure tainted by corruption scandals, a majority of Argentines view Fernández as the politician most likely to achieve dialogue and consensus to move the country forward (Di Giorgio 2020). Citizens also generally view Fernández as the leader most capable of rescuing the country from the pandemic and striking a favorable deal with foreign creditors to address the country's formidable economic crisis (Horwitz 2020).

In sum, the mechanisms through which Peronism recently returned to power under the leadership of Alberto Fernández suggest that the movement's personalistic core remains intact. He has consolidated impressive popularity

by taking bold actions in the face of a global pandemic and a serious economic recession, and has connected on an emotional level with Argentines to a far greater extent than Macri, his technocratic and non-Peronist predecessor. Additionally, Fernández has drawn on his resounding popular approval to begin to impose greater coherence on the Peronist movement, using informal channels to maintain the unity of diverse officials within his *Frente de Todos* coalition. Fernández's leadership mirrors that of Néstor Kirchner, who established impressive political capital shortly after assuming the presidency in 2003 and used it to dominate the Peronist movement two years later by overtaking Duhalde. To be sure, Fernández continues to face enormous economic and political challenges, and the future of Peronism remains uncertain. But if he continues to exercise charisma in the face of hardship, it is not unlikely that he will successfully consolidate his position as the new savior of Peronism.

#### 7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has documented the spasmodic pattern in which charismatic movements unfold. Following a crisis, a valiant leader surges to power, promising to rescue the people from their suffering. To substantiate his capacities as an all-powerful redeemer, the leader concentrates authority by cultivating deeply emotional bonds with voters, fragmenting political parties, and overriding institutional constraints. Through this process, the leader establishes a political movement rooted in his charismatic appeal.

Eventually, the founder's seemingly extraordinary, yet inherently unsustainable, performance begins to falter. Having undermined institutional safeguards in the name of concentrating power, the founder's government stands on the brink of collapse. Because the founder dies or disappears before the moment of doom arrives, he escapes blame for the ensuing disaster. Nevertheless, the inevitable eruption of a crisis – compounded by the sudden absence of the founder's charismatic authority – causes the movement to recede from politics. Crucially, this retreat from power is temporary; it does not cause the movement's permanent demise, nor does it set in motion a process of institutionalization. Instead, the citizens' profound, affective identification with the founder persists and helps perpetuate his movement in politically latent form.

During this period of crisis, the followers' worldview remains rooted in the founder's personalistic authority. The followers mourn the loss of their beloved savior and desperately wish for a symbolic reincarnation to appear and take charge of the chaotic situation. Meanwhile, thanks in large part to the founder's aggressive quest for supreme power, political parties remain deeply fragmented and political institutions remain weak. I contend that these conditions do not lend themselves to reconstructing a routinized party system. Instead, they create opportunities for new politicians to revive the movement by embodying the founder's charismatic style.

Thus, out of the ashes of the movement's first collapse, a new leader has the opportunity to rise and restore the movement to power. Like the founder, the successor accomplishes this by tapping into the followers' unmediated emotional attachments and implementing daring reforms, which she achieves by overpowering parties and weakening institutions that threaten her executive power. These personalistic tactics help the successor resuscitate the movement, yet their viability rests on short-lived policies and poor political infrastructure. Paradoxically, then, the successor's victory plants the seeds for another collapse. While this failure may discredit the leader in question, however, the movement – whose legitimacy rests primarily on the charismatic legacy of the founder – survives. The cycle therefore repeats, perpetuating the movement while generating recurrent political and economic volatility. In the following chapter, I reflect on the self-reinforcing nature of charismatic movements and draw broader conclusions about the consequences for democracy.