“For an Arab There Can Be Nothing Better Than Another Arab”: Nation, Ethnicity and Citizenship in Peronist Argentina

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In a speech delivered on 17 October 1950, President Juan Domingo Perón presented to the tens of thousands of people gathered in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires the Twenty Fundamental Truths of the Peronist doctrine, known as Justicialism (from the word justice). The sixth tenet, proclaimed in front of the cheering crowd, stated that “There can be nothing better for a Peronist than another Peronist.” 1

Four years later, in a speech before Arab-Argentine leaders, Perón added an additional fundamental “truth” to his populist vocabulary, this time with an ethnic twist:

... this community, so linked in brotherhood and such a friend of ours, [may it] always stay united; and may it keep in mind that just as we say that for a Peronist there is nothing better than another Peronist, within the Arab community in Argentina, too, there should be nothing better for an Arab than another Arab.

May it be God’s will that, following the doctrinal orientation of our Justicialism, you will come to think that unity is the only way to prevail. May you believe that united you shall prevail. We cannot speak of unity in the Middle East, but we can discuss Arab unity in Argentina. It is to this unity that I want to give my full support, my sincerity and my loyalty, so the Arab community living in Argentina may always be united. Let us not forget that one of the aphorisms of Peronism states, “United we shall prevail.” 2

The Peronist decade was a time of shifting meanings and frontiers of citizenship in Argentina. The country went through profound changes, and government actions contributed to debates over the understanding and conceptualization

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1 Juan Domingo Perón, Peronist Doctrine, edited by the Peronist Party (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1952).
of citizenship. Argentina in those years experienced transformations in political representation and moved toward a revised model of participatory democracy. In so doing, it took an important step toward becoming what today would be considered a multicultural society. Ethnic identities became less of a menace to the concept of *argentinidad* (Argentineness). Instead of the traditional melting pot, Perón’s government lent its support to hyphenated identities, emphasizing the wide variety of cultural sources on which Argentine society was based. The authorities offered unprecedented recognition of cultural and ethnic differences.³

This chapter examines Peronism’s efforts to mobilize support among Arab-Argentines. These endeavors reflected how Perón’s original vision of Argentina as an essentially Catholic country evolved toward a more inclusive one of a multi-religious and multicultural society that should embrace and celebrate its diversity.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the role of Arab-Argentines in politics became significant at the municipal and provincial, as well as the national level. When Carlos Saúl Menem was elected president in 1989, this ethnic group reached the high point of its process of political inclusion. During the ten years of his administration, Arab-Argentines exerted remarkable influence on the Argentine political system. These politicians were characterized by their provincial origin and their membership in Peronist and neo-Peronist parties.

One prominent Arab-Argentine politician was Vicente Leónidas Saadi, the son of Lebanese immigrants who arrived in the province of Catamarca in the early twentieth century. As part of the Peronist movement, the Saadi family controlled local politics for nearly fifty years. A similar case is that of Felipe Sapag, from Neuquén. His family continued to rule there from the time it became a province until the second decade of the twenty-first century via the neo-Peronist political party they founded—the Movimiento Popular Neuquino (MPN). A third case of a provincial chieftain of Arab heritage is that of the governor of Corrientes province, Julio Romero,⁴ whose family came

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