

Hand of gold

Another government bail-out.

Between them, Argentina's president, Cristina Fernández, and her husband and predecessor, Néstor Kirchner, have nationalised their country's post office, its airline and the private pension system. Now, it seems, it is the turn of football to come under the state's aegis. This week the Argentine Football Association was poised to accept an offer of \$154m from the state television channel for the rights to transmit this season's matches. The association's president, Julio Grondona, unilaterally ripped up a contract lasting until 2014 under which Torneos y Competencias (TyC), a private broadcaster and partner of the Clarín media group, paid \$70m a year for the lion's share of the broadcasting rights.

Nobody disputes that Argentine football is a mess. Many of the brightest Argentine stars play for much bigger salaries in Europe, so many clubs field teams made up of youths and veterans. Despite this transfer income, mismanagement and corruption mean that many of the clubs are shouldering big debts, including \$8m in unpaid wages to players and \$80m in taxes. That prompted Mr Grondona, who has ruled Argentine football with an iron hand for 30 years, to threaten to suspend indefinitely the new season's kick-off, scheduled for August 14th.

The Kirchners fared poorly in a legislative election in June. Ms Fernández's government lost its majority in the lower house of Congress, while Mr Kirchner was humiliated by coming second in the election for deputies in Buenos Aires province. Opponents claim that the new television deal was crafted personally by Mr Kirchner to restore his political fortunes.

First, he would be seen as the saviour of the season, as well as the man who put football on free-to-air television (though cable, on which TyC is available, is widespread in Argentina). Second he would strike a blow against the Clarín group, whose newspaper has been critical of him. TyC's president claims that Mr Kirchner persuaded Mr Grondona to switch the contract at a late-night meeting, and says he will sue the association. Officials later denied that the meeting took place.

Football and politics have rarely been far apart in Argentina. When the World Cup was held there in 1978, the country's then military junta is alleged to have arranged to bribe an opposing team to ensure Argentina's progress and eventual victory. To curry public favour, the junta also stooped to abolishing relegation when popular teams were threatened with demotion to a lower league.

Mauricio Macri, the mayor of Buenos Aires, built his reputation by successfully running Boca Juniors, one of the capital's two big clubs. Such jobs are hotly contested, despite the clubs' poor financial state. Buenos Aires is plastered with posters for rival candidates in an election for the presidency of River Plate, Boca's big rival. Whoever wins may now command a bigger pot of television money—courtesy of the taxpayer.

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