

AIMING HIGH

—Buenos Aires

Preface

Mauricio Macri shunned his family business to pursue a life in politics. Now mayor of Buenos Aires and a presidential candidate, he reacts to corruption accusations and tells us why running a football club has been his biggest role to date.

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Mauricio Macri's life reads like a *telenovela* – the soap operas famous throughout Latin America. Born into a powerful Italian-Argentinean family, his father Franco heads one of the largest private sector companies in the country with interests in construction and the car industry. Mauricio, educated at an English-language college, was catapulted into the limelight in 1991 when he was kidnapped and held for 12 days before being released for a reported multimillion-dollar ransom fee. He went on to leave the family business and decided to pursue his own path in 1995, first becoming president of Boca Juniors football club – the most famous team in Argentina – and then mayor of Buenos Aires from 2007.

The city government headquarters stand on one corner of Plaza de Mayo, the Argentinean capital's main square, a few hundred metres from the pink-hued presidential palace. After flirting with the idea in the past, the 54-year-old now has his eyes set on the country's top job and has already put himself forward as a presidential candidate for elections in 2015 with his centre-right PRO party.

But Mauricio Macri continues to divide people: to his followers he is a media-friendly mayor who has turned Buenos Aires into a cultural capital. To his detractors he is embroiled in political

scandals – accused of colluding with the metropolitan police to tap rivals' phones and running the city as a business.

Monocle: *What has been more important to your career, president of Boca Juniors football club or mayor of Buenos Aires?*

Mauricio Macri: Boca. When I travel to Europe I tend to get referred to as the “former president of Boca Juniors” and then “current mayor of the city of Buenos Aires”. Boca is a global passion with around 50 million fans. Obviously we are doing more important things here in city hall but passions have no explanation.

M: *You've talked about putting yourself forward for president in the past but withdrew. Why the decision to definitely run in 2015?*

MM: It was part of a process. I worked in the private sector – construction, the automobile industry and banking – and then sport. And for six years now I've had the honour of running one of the most important cities in the world. I think that I've acquired the experience and the team to lead the changes this country needs.

M: *What's your relationship with President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner like?*

MM: We never used to have a relationship; we still don't really. Now at least we are trying to talk about a couple of issues but it is still a long way from a relationship. If you want people to live better you have to find room to work together.

M: *You want Buenos Aires to be green but there still seems to be a chronic waste-disposal problem in the city and very little recycling.*

MM: Some 6,000 tonnes a day was going to landfill in the province until the beginning of this year and that figure is now 3,800 tonnes – so there has been a big advance. We're also working in schools to educate children so that they teach their parents to recycle. We're also changing all public lighting in the city to LED and expect to have 80 per cent of the city covered in the next 24 months. This will reduce energy consumption by around 60 per cent.

M: *There are two major issues each summer in Buenos Aires: flooding after heavy rain and*

power cuts. Are these the two fundamental infrastructure issues?

MM: It would be wonderful if our infrastructure problems were only limited to two. Regarding the first issue, we have been working on two river drainage basins. One is being enlarged to improve its capacity by 50 per cent and there is a project in progress, pending World Bank approval, to completely solve the problem. In terms of power, this is part of a disastrous national energy policy in which consumer tariffs have been frozen at the expense of investment.

M: *You've labelled Buenos Aires' metropolitan police force a success on numerous occasions. But after a series of scandals, including phone tapping and accusations of heavy handedness, do you still see it that way?*

MM: Those subjects you mention are part of a political attack [against me]. The phone-tapping scandal was an invention of the national government from the very beginning because they control the judges – but it doesn't mean it is true. Buenos Aires residents re-elected me with 64 per cent of the vote so it shows that people didn't believe it.

M: *What are the challenges for Buenos Aires – and Argentina – in the future?*

MM: For Buenos Aires the challenge is improving living standards. This includes investing in sustainable infrastructure and making sure everyone has access to technological and communications advances. In terms of Argentina it needs to generate an environment that promotes investment and technological innovation.

M: *Which city leaders do you admire most?*

MM: Michael Bloomberg in New York, Marcelo Ebrard [head of Mexico City's government 2006-2012], Rio de Janeiro mayor Eduardo Paes and Boris Johnson in London. They've all shown political leadership with an eye on the future.

M: *Which other cities can Buenos Aires learn from?*

MM: In terms of a green agenda, Mexico City, New York and Berlin. In terms of creativity and entrepreneurialism, London, Tel Aviv and Singapore. — (M)

