NOTES ON THE FAR RIGHT IN THE SOUTH

Argentina's authoritarian turn: origins, crisis situations and human rights strategies

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Argentina

This article is organized into three parts. First, it outlines the particularities of the far right in Argentina, describes its specific traits and identifies which ones are unique and which bear a family resemblance to those of other regional and global far right movements. It also presents a critical and conceptual analysis that serves as a reference on the far right in general. Next, it explores what these governments are a response to and the crises that they exploit to mount their plans. In different places on the map, liberal democracy is showing its limits and its lack of effort to address the consequences of the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, which is reflected in the degradation of not only the rights of the majorities, but also the environment. This leads us to believe that the far right is not the only problem we face, but also the failure to democratize wealth and participation. Finally, the article discusses what human rights organizations can do to stop the advance of the far right in the region, with which allies and the challenges that they will face along the way.

Keywords
Far right, Argentina, liberal democracy

You have geography and you have history. The maps from the last fifteen years show that the number of countries governed by far-right parties has grown. One by one, they turn the same colour in the post-election reports usually published on different continents. History tells us, however, that although their colours look similar, what led them to where they are today are distinct, tortuous paths that, depending on their region, originate in specific political plots. The advance of the far right in different parts of the world poses a common threat to human rights and an urgent challenge for those of us who strive to make democracy an expression of social justice. The experience of each country is different, but there are bridges between them.

In Argentina, the living memory of state violence during the dictatorship and the strong tradition of fighting for rights were unable to prevent Javier Milei and Victoria Villaruel from coming to power in a country marked by yet another economic crisis. In this article, we will attempt to reconstruct three dimensions: the specific characteristics of this new right; how it uses the Argentinean government to carry out its authoritarian cultural and political plan, and the challenges that this imposes on human rights organizations and feminisms. As we do so, one thing is for certain: what we have before us is not just an economic problem or one of neocolonialism and governability. The far right is not merely a neoliberal adjustment programme, but rather an authoritarian plan to reorganize societies, in which violence is rhizomatic. At the core of this plan is control of bodies—in the streets, on digital media, at work, at schools—, sexual disciplining, violence towards Indigenous peoples and the reduction of life experiences to their market value.

Traits of the Argentinean far right: between the singular and the global

As researchers Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Tatiana Vargas-Maia[1] point out, the new reactionary right uses a repertoire that tends to become universalized: they feed on the effects of the global recession, the collapse of the welfare state, the resentment of impoverished middle classes and the revolt against the unfulfilled promises of liberal democracy. In Argentina, this repertoire intertwines with the intense, conservative culture of a minority that contests—and pressures against—advances in progressive legislation, such as gender equality laws, and transfeminist mobilizations. It reacts to a history of struggle for human rights that shaped common understandings of democracy. It attacks the memory and the process to obtain justice for the crimes of the last civic-military dictatorship and calls on the military to take illegal action. And it capitalizes on social frustrations with a peripheral, dependent economy that is saddled with foreign debt and expectations of finding salvation in re-primarization and extractivism.

The local far right has been cultivating its enemies for years, well before the current government took office. We say enemies, and not political adversaries, because the rhetoric is one of extreme polarization, hatred and, in some cases, dehumanization. We are not just dealing with intense political confrontation, but rather mechanisms of de-democratization that erode the very possibility of dissent and replace it with the logic of the symbolic annihilation of the adversary. These are all moves to shut down public debate. Discourses of hate towards journalists, Indigenous peoples, migrants, feminist, sexual dissidents, civil servants or sectors of the political opposition encourage discriminatory practices and political violence: they strip those who are labelled as "others" of value. In Argentina, we have begun to notice that this aggressiveness promoted by sectors of the government is spreading

horizontally—that is, pervasively through society. If we look carefully at the activities of the people who made attempts on the life of Cristina Fernández,[2] we find that they were involved in the polarizing, hateful hostility towards the former president's party. We know that democracy does not exist without dissent and that it essentially requires shared rules, mutual recognition and a common language. This is being threatened by the current political rhetoric.

The shrinking of civic space and the criminalization of protest are the pillars of the new authoritarian configuration under the Milei government. The Ministry of Security promoted—together with messages on law and order—an anti-protest protocol[3] that made almost all public demonstrations a crime. This rule defined all protests involving street or road blockades as *flagrante delicto* offences and allows security forces to intervene to dislodge and disperse protesters. After a few months, the government toughened its stance and began to include protests in its narrative on anti-terrorism and institutional destabilization. Since the implementation of the protocol, the use of force has become the rule, arbitrary arrests and raids on social organizations have multiplied and the stigmatization of activism has intensified. It also contains provisions that permit information to be gathered to criminalize, persecute and stigmatize leaders and participants of public demonstrations and the political, social and union organizations involved. Repression is not considered excessive, nor a mistake: it is a deliberate policy aimed at discouraging protest and isolating anyone who complains.

Meanwhile, the economic restructuring and the downsizing of the state resulted in a brutal transfer of resources from the working majority and middle classes to the richest sectors. The government made cuts to retirement pensions, health and education policies and service subsidies, while granting tax and regulatory benefits to big companies and tax evaders. These measures affect families, in general; the elderly, directly, as

their pensions have borne the bulk of the cutbacks; women, who watch as care is reprivatized; trans persons, and people with disabilities. Funding for sexual and reproductive health policies was slashed in the first few days of government in 2024.

The economic model adopted is sustained by an extractivist and de-industrializing matrix, far removed from any egalitarian project. The Régimen de Incentivo a las Grandes Inversiones (RIGI or Large Investments Incentive Scheme) crystallizes an economic model geared towards raw material exports, with no environmental protections nor respect for the rights of local communities. Indigenous peoples have been criminalized for occupying territories—which they claim as their ancestral property—that are coveted by extractivist capital. The government is pursuing a "productive security" policy, which would even allow it to militarize the territories to ensure that business operations are able to continue and to defuse social conflicts by force.

In this context, the government has reinforced the state surveillance system. The widening of the concept of "terrorism" and the militarization of internal security zones, such as the country's northern border, put pressure mainly on social organizations, grassroots movements and the opposition. The intelligence apparatus has also regained a leading role, a budget, discretion in the use of funds and new powers justified by a discourse on the fight against supposed global and national threats.

The government also pushed ahead with its strategy to explicitly attack the democratic memory of the dictatorship. It vindicated the state and illegal violence of those years, gutted the Memory, Truth and Justice policies and attacked human rights organizations. The figure of Victoria Villarruel, the country's vice-president who has connections with military officers convicted of crimes against humanity, is a clear indication of the goal of this strategy: to rewrite recent history.

At the heart of this authoritarian plan is control of the body's reproductive capacity, a return to a sexual order and political regime centred on the heterosexual nuclear family and the elimination of dissident ways of life, such as trans existences. In recent months, in several countries, but undoubtedly in the United States and Argentina, the far right has been trying to portray low birth rates as a problem to attack policies protecting women and girls' autonomy over their bodies. This is not a secondary matter, but rather a direct assault on the most powerful and organized global liberation movement. This disciplinary goal is the ideological and strategic core of the contemporary far right and where all the far right forces in the world intersect.

The Milei government, for its part, has a strong cultural and symbolic colonialist stance. The country's foreign policy is now automatically aligned with the United States and Israel. It has been pursuing a hostile policy towards the international human rights system: from explicit contempt for multilateral organizations, which it claims are "ideologized", to dismissing protection agreements and delegitimizing the system by using nationalist arguments against what it considers a "globalist" culture that undermines sovereignty. These pompous and even buffoonish stances are an attempt to dodge the Argentinean state's commitments on the protection of human rights and decouple public policy from international legal standards. This only weakens protection mechanisms further and justifies renewed arbitrariness on the part of the state.

What kind of trap is democracy in?

Not all neoliberal governments are de-democratizing, although many would agree that inequality obscures the very meaning of democracy. But there is a specific kind of government—that of the authoritarian far right—that combines extreme neoliberalism with institutional and cul-

tural practices that erode democracy. What distinguishes these governments is the way they reorganize political power, govern by decree, dismantle control mechanisms and reject diversity, otherness, pluralism and collective organizing as basic principles of democratic coexistence.

By way of a reference, we could say that a government is de-democratizing when it not only limits access to rights, but also modifies the material and symbolic conditions that make these rights collectively enforceable, defendable and challengeable. It becomes authoritarian when it empties the representative system of content, weakens institutions that serve as counterbalances, criminalizes dissent, stigmatizes or dehumanizes social groups, turns dissent into a public threat and uses the state apparatus to consolidate a model of exclusion.

We believe that it is important to expose the fascist face of the current political phenomenon. This political depiction is based on not only activist experience and memory, but also analytical work. By fascism we mean a phenomenon that can be political, ideological or a social practice. According to researcher Robert Paxton,[4] an authoritarian movement grows, makes its way into mainstream politics, rises to power and exercises it through repressive and exclusionary methods in a sequence of stages. The heart of this movement does not lie in its doctrinal principles, but rather in its capacity to mobilize collective frustrations and use them against real or fabricated internal enemies. Its characteristics can vary from one country to another, since—and because—it is not a rigid ideology, but rather a highly malleable power dynamic.

Unlike other neoliberal governments that we have already lived through in Latin America, these governments naturalize and moralize inequality: people who do not have rights have not tried hard enough. They not only defund social policies, but also attack those who demand state presence. Through this lens, rights are portrayed as theft and an illegiti-

mate and immoral appropriation of wealth. The basis of this rhetoric is racist, patriarchal and colonial. And, at the same time, they strengthen the economic oligarchies that, in many countries with far right governments, are involved in state management. Their quest to restore old social hierarchies of gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality shows that control of bodies is just as important as fiscal adjustment.

In this context, the human rights perspective is not just a legal instrument or a political tradition agreed upon after the horrors of World War II; it is a framework for analysing the ways in which democracy is being eroded. Under this approach, it is not enough to observe the legality of government actions: one must look at which institutions are being hollowed out, which ones are strengthened, which groups are subjected to systematic repression or exclusion, how social violence circulates, which narratives about history and society are imposed and which conditions of possibility are still open or closed to political participation.

Another vector to take into account are the government actions that leave some features of democracy intact, such as elections and the separation of powers, while rendering other fundamental aspects meaningless: effective control between institutional powers and openness to public scrutiny; the principle of equality; inclusion; the recognition of differences and social justice. This is where the contemporary far right gets into a knot: in the simulation of democracy.

What we can do

Although we are not dealing with classic totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, many of their political, social and, above all, emotional dynamics persist and are being brought up-to-date in democracies run by far-right governments. What is at stake is not only the concentration

of power, but also the type of social mobilizations being promoted: reactionary, emotional ones that feed on resentment and fear. This is how they fabricate internal enemies that end up being expelled from the world of humans or citizens.

The challenges are thus multiplying, and there are no recipes or foolproof plans. In 2024 and 2025, the streets of Argentina, the United States, Serbia and Germany showed that the crisis of representation is not necessarily a crisis of politics. There, we saw social creativity, new forms of protest and mobilizing and unexpected alliances.

Human rights organizations have the challenge of resisting the advance of authoritarianism without getting trapped in conservative or formalist discourses. We need to be able to imagine the world that we want to live in based on new, broader perspectives that include transfeminisms, environmental movements, trade unions, youths and Indigenous peoples.

In the face of this threat, human rights must not be a floor of minimum aspirations, but rather a political device that raises its voice to imagine radical change in the future. We are fighting to define democracy. To confront a global far right that presents itself as change and order, we suggest radicalizing our struggles by breaking with inequality, sex/gender oppression, colonialism and the concentration of power.

To call ourselves anti-fascists and human rights defenders today is to state our ethics and practice. It means helping to reclaim the common sense hijacked by the far right—a democratic common sense that affirms basic things: that we reject torture and crimes against humanity, we defend freedom of expression, we defend the right to abortion, trans lives matter and are valuable, having access to he-

alth and education are emancipatory democratic agreements, freedom is different from consumption, political surveillance should be prohibited, and the environment is a legacy and not a commodity to be exploited.

The fight is now. And it is for everything.

Notes

1 Pinheiro-Machado, Rosana and Tatiana Vargas-Maia. "Why We Need a New Framework to Study the Far Right in the Global South," Global Dialogue, March 9, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/2bbn6mnm.

2 The former president suffered an attempt on her life in front of her home when she was greeting protestors that had gathered to show their solidarity with her during the legal proceedings against her, which had been denounced for numerous irregularities. The perpetrator shot a gun twice, but no ammunition was fired.

3 Ministerio de Seguridad, Presidencia de la Nación, República de Argentina, "Resolución 943/2023," December 14, 2023, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.boletinoficial.gob.ar/detalleAviso/primera/300917/20231215.

4 Robert O. Paxton, Anatomía del fascismo (Madrid: Capitán Swing Libros, 2019).

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