

Six Months of Javier Milei's Government in Argentina: Shock Doctrine and Libertarian Authoritarianism



Since taking office in December 2023, Javier Milei's government has used the pretext of necessary macroeconomic stabilization to eliminate and weaken social and labor protections for the majority of the population, in addition to deregulating environmental protection policies. Taken together, these measures constitute a shock process aimed at radically changing Argentina's social model under the local far-right agenda. Moreover, the alliance that made Milei's victory possible is composed of a diverse array of right-wing factions. Their common denominator lies less in an economic agenda than it does in a shared belief that they are waging a cultural battle against progressivism. Feminism, environmental activism, social and human rights movements, and efforts against the impunity for crimes committed during the dictatorship—all are seen as adversaries by this conservative coalition, particularly because they have historically collaborated with the state to develop policies that expand rights.

Furthermore, Milei's coalition, including well-known figures from Argentine politics—such as the Minister of Economy and the Minister of Security from the Pro Republican Party (PRO), which governed during 2015-2019—establishes governance and social legitimacy in unprecedented ways. Their heavy reliance on social networks in communication strategies is particularly notable, effectively engaging a disillusioned youth with the political system.

While this approach is novel within our context, parallels can be drawn to similar uses of digital platforms by far-right movements globally, placing Milei within an international constellation alongside figures like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Nayib Bukele, Giorgia Meloni, Santiago Abascal, and Viktor Orbán.

In addition to adopting a global far-right agenda, the government appears to be detached from positions



Photo: Lehmann/Misereor

Sale of T-shirts on Memory Day with the slogan „Never Again“ in reference to the 30,000 victims of the military dictatorship

that have been broadly built across various political parties since the democratic transition; it also has deliberately distanced itself from the Latin American region. Changes in voting criteria on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the questioning of the International Court of Justice and its prosecutor's office have implied a weakening of Argentina's humanitarian commitment to peace in the eyes of both the regional and international communities. Furthermore, on international platforms, government officials have consistently opposed human rights protections, the rights of women and people with the capacity to become pregnant, and environmental safeguards.

Regarding MERCOSUR, Milei has adopted a skeptical stance toward the bloc, criticizing it for its protectionist policies and bureaucratic inefficiencies. This shift has led Argentina to adopt a more isolated stance within the bloc, advocating for greater flexibility in negotiating bilateral trade agreements outside the MERCOSUR. This has created tensions with other member states, who favor a more unified approach to negotiations, impacting Argentina's involvement in the multiple human rights spaces that the bloc includes for discussing regional agendas and coordinated policies. The open confrontation with Brazilian President Lula and his controversies against China, the region's most important trade partner, are evidence of a highly ideologized foreign policy. All these positions run counter to Argentina's tradition of



Recognition of the tireless effort for truth and justice by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the mothers of activists who disappeared during the dictatorship

protecting and expanding rights, respecting international cooperation rules, and supporting regional integration processes in Latin America.

Reforms for a Minimal State

In its initial months, the Milei administration launched an aggressive campaign against living conditions and social organization in Argentina. Decree of Necessity and Urgency No. 70/23 exemplifies this new phase, as it intervened in laws previously supported by broad social consensus and discussed in participatory forums. While the Argentine Constitution allows the Executive Branch to issue decrees of necessity and urgency under exceptional circumstances in which it is impossible to follow the normal legislative processes, this decree is currently in effect. It significantly impacts various aspects of community life, including health—by disregarding caps on private health service fees—housing—through the repeal of the rental law—labor relations—with efforts to increase flexibility and restrict the right to strike—and

environmental protection, as well as the recognition of ancestral lands of indigenous communities.

In the early months of the year, the Milei government attempted to pass a comprehensive legislative package through parliamentary procedures, titled the „Law of Foundations and Starting Points for the Freedom of Argentines,“ commonly referred to as the „Omnibus Law“ due to its extensive legal provisions. However, it faced setbacks in the Senate due to conflicts in negotiating agreements with centrist and center-right sectors. Subsequently, the bill was revised and scaled down. On June 12, the Senate passed this revised version of the bill alongside a fiscal law project, having received preliminary approval in the Lower House.

The “Law of Foundations” and the “Fiscal Package,” with the latest modifications after being reviewed in the Senate, includes the following points:

- Tax reduction for high-income sectors.
- Elimination of the pension moratorium that allowed people with informal jobs, mostly women, access to retirement benefits.
- No guarantee of environmental protection in the section related to the Incentive Regime for Large Investments, which is aimed at extractivist development; and no provision for the protection of the rights of peasant and indigenous communities.
- Privatization of a large number of public companies.
- Confirmation of the delegation of extraordinary powers to the Executive Branch.
- Reduction of fines for employers who do not register their employees.

The debates in both legislative chambers highlight the government's political agenda: a plan that shifts income from an impoverished society to economic sectors that concentrate wealth, thereby enshrining social inequality. This legal reform favors large corporations—both national and foreign—while putting wage-dependent individuals, particularly workers and retirees, at a disadvantage.

Both bills are complementary. The fiscal reform reduces the personal property tax for the wealthiest decile of the country and facilitates lenient procedures for capital repatriation. Meanwhile, it reinstates the income tax for the middle-income sectors—already hit by wage erosion, rising food prices, and increases in private healthcare costs—and nullifies the pension moratorium that allowed 8 out of 10 people to retire. Additionally, the „Law of Foundations“ bill promotes unchecked labor outsourcing and eliminates any responsibility for those managing the production processes of goods and services in Argentina.

The bill also seeks legislative delegation for the Executive Branch, following the declaration of a „public emergency in administrative, economic, financial, and energy matters for a period of one year.“ Despite the reduction of Executive powers compared to the bill's previous version, the Executive Branch still demands the authority to govern by decree, aiming to reshape Argentina's societal structure with the market as the guiding principle. The government's fiscal goals are being achieved at the expense of pensions, and the current economic scenario shows a decline in employment and purchasing power of wages, and decreased activity across various sectors. Poverty reached 55.5% of the population in the first quarter of 2024, with extreme poverty at 17.5%, according to estimates by the Social Debt Observatory of the Argentine Catholic University. This means that around 25 million Argentines live below the poverty line, and nearly 8 million are in extreme poverty, unable to afford the Basic Food Basket.

This scenario is compounded by a relaxation of protections for Argentina's natural resources. The „Law of Foundations“ bill includes provisions that significantly roll back environmental protection. It under-



Photo: Lehmann/Misereor

Intergenerational protest in remembrance and part of the culture of memory in Argentina

mines the principle of non-regression in environmental matters contained in the Escazú Agreement, the first regional environmental agreement in Latin America, which Argentina ratified into law in 2020. These proposed changes are viewed as violating the non-regression principle by lowering existing levels of environmental safeguards. Moreover, the bill aims to favor primary and extractive economic activities through various customs, tax, currency, and regulatory benefits, and authorizes the elimination of critical agencies like the National Parks Administration, as well as the dissolution of currently scarce funds designated for conserving native forests and combating major forest fires.

Social Unrest on the Rise

The far-right's acquisition of state power not only amplifies their hate speech and increases its potential dissemination but also significantly enhances their capacity for repression. This has been evidenced in the formulation of a police action protocol that authorizes security forces to disperse public demonstrations whenever protesters disrupt or obstruct traffic. Furthermore, it rolls back safeguards on the use of police force, such as eliminating restrictions on carrying firearms during social protests, initially meant only for federal security forces but now cited to justify repressive actions by local police.

In the first six months of this government, social movements, laid-off public workers, retirees, leftist and Peronist party activists, and activists defending cultural programs shuttered by the government have all faced repression during protests.

Following the initial protests, the government levied exorbitant fines, impossible for a group of social organizations and labor unions that participated in the demonstrations to pay. State authorities persist in stigmatizing social movements and protest organizations in their rhetoric. Most recently, in Misiones province, the national government escalated this by deploying federal security forces to quell protests by teachers and police officers demanding salary increases that currently fall below the poverty line.

During these demonstrations, the police showed particular hostility, resulting in severe injuries to journalists and media workers covering the events. These actions to deter social movements are part of a larger strategy aimed at undermining press freedom and the public's right to information, exemplified by the shutdown of Télam, the national public news agency. Subsequently, the protest in Misiones province was primarily covered by independent media and first-hand accounts from the protesters themselves.



Photo: Lehmann/Misereor

Creative protest on Memory Day with puppets of Javier Milei and Victoria Villaruel

11

demonstrations repressed in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

43

people detained during the demonstrations.

Use of less-lethal weapons: rubber bullets, batons, irritant chemicals, water cannons.

2

people suffered loss of vision due to the impact of rubber bullets.

\$134

million pesos in fines imposed.

The government's tightening of restrictions on civic space is so severe that it not only poses a threat to protesters by potentially removing certain social protections, but also includes a recent social program under which participants must not have taken part in protests that disrupt public traffic. This disproportionately affects impoverished individuals who lack formal employment and rely on public spaces as their only means to voice social demands. Despite this, Argentine society remains mobilized in response to the deteriorating socio-economic situation. In less than six months, we have witnessed and participated in two general strikes, a massive march in major cities across the country supporting public universities and opposing their defunding, a massive March 8th International Women's Day protest against misogyny, violence, and public policy cuts proposed by Milei, as well as numerous demonstrations whenever Parliament revisits any of the controversial bills promoted by the government.

Denialism Reloaded

The emergence of Javier Milei and his vice president Victoria Villaruel represents a turning point from the foundation painstakingly laid by the Argentine human rights movement since the restoration of democracy in 1983. Unlike other countries in the Southern Cone that endured military dictatorships, Argentina became a beacon of experience in terms of memory, truth, and justice policies. It succeeded in convicting military officials responsible for crimes against humanity such as torture, disappearances, and child



Protest on International Women's Day by the General Confederation of Labor against market-based policies that violate human rights

abduction. „Never Again,“ the name given to the report by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, became a cornerstone of the new democratic pact, acknowledging the scale of atrocities committed during the dictatorship and reaffirming the intolerability of such crimes in the modern era.

However, social consensus around the various stages of this process of memory, truth, and justice did not develop without resistance, primarily led by former members of the Armed Forces and their families. Vice President Villarruel is the daughter and granddaughter of military personnel; her father played an active role during the dictatorship, and she has been involved in political activism advocating for individuals accused of crimes against humanity. Her dismissal of the longstanding efforts of the human rights movement stems from this background, forming a narrative that seeks to downplay military accountability during the dictatorship, while fostering discourse that disparages the human rights movement.

The spread of these messages—via social media and through government actions—has tangible repercussions, including undermining investigations into the systematic plan orchestrated by the military government. It has also led to increased acts of vandalism against memorial sites. Recently, it even paved the way for a commemorative event celebrating military power at the largest clandestine detention center of the dictatorship, the Navy Mechanics School, with the Ministry of Defense's endorsement.

In this context, a warm welcome to the Argentine president should not be a priority. Rather, all involved actors need to conduct critical analysis and propose new international alliances between Europe and Latin America. The current global scenario presents tangible risks to human rights protections, particularly with the rise of the far-right in different parts of the world. Urgent reformulation of interregional cooperation is needed to collectively address the threat of democracy erosion.

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Broad and diverse mobilization of civil society organizations
on the Memory Day in Buenos Aires 2024