

The hard right captivates the Argentinean electorate

Tuesday 15 August 2023, by [SCHUSTER Mariano](#), [STEFANONI Pablo](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2023).

Argentina's primary elections caused a political earthquake. In addition to the first place of libertarian Javier Milei, Peronism came in third place. Never before had the radicalised right gained so many votes.

On Sunday 13 August, the Argentinian election experienced a political earthquake. The far-right libertarian candidate - and *outsider* of traditional politics - Javier Milei won first place, with 30% of the votes; the liberal-conservative opposition came second, with fewer votes than expected (28%), and Peronism, for the first time in history, came third, with 27% of the votes.

The open, simultaneous and compulsory primaries (PASO) are a *sui generis* type of election: in theory, they are for each force to choose its candidates, but in practice, as the entire electoral roll votes, they are a pre-first round, creating the climate for the real election which, in this case, will take place on 22 October. For this reason, the analysis of the PASO has two levels: on the one hand, who wins each internal election, if there is competition, and on the other, what the election says about the correlation of forces between the different parties and coalitions.

On the first point, in Juntos por el Cambio (JxC), the victory of former Security Minister Patricia Bullrich over Buenos Aires Mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta is worth highlighting. A victory, in short, of the "hawks" against the "doves" in the main opposition force; of Bullrich's "If it's not everything, it's nothing" against Rodríguez Larreta's gradualist bet. Bullrich's campaign had all the ingredients: it had both a folksy style and a strong emphasis on the 'iron fist' against insecurity - but also against social protest. Her victory in the internal elections made Bullrich a candidate with a good chance of reaching the Casa Rosada. A militant of the revolutionary Peronism of the 1970s, Bullrich later turned to the hard right, although she maintains "liberal" positions in other areas, reflected in her support for the decriminalisation of abortion and the approval of equal marriage.

From the point of view of the primaries themselves, there were no surprises in Javier Milei's camp, as he was the only contender from his camp: La Libertad Avanza. Finally, in Peronism, the "unity" candidate Sergio Massa, an ultra-pragmatic centrist supported by the former president and current vice-president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, won by a wide margin. However, Juan Grabois, a left-wing populist close to Pope Francis, won the vote of several left-wing Kirchnerists who were reluctant to vote for Massa. Grabois' voters tended to see him as a kind of "pure Kirchnerista" who recovered part of the narrative and legacy of the original Kirchnerism, especially its Christinist version. A somewhat strange situation, insofar as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner herself had backed the candidacy of the current economy minister. The "Boss" supported Massa's candidacy after the "fall" of the candidacy of Eduardo "Wado" de Pedro, current Minister of the Interior belonging to La Cámpora, the group linked to Máximo Kirchner and the most important of the Christinist structure. After a group of governors asked Massa to be the candidate, Fernández de Kirchner gave the go-ahead. Grabois' ideological gamble constituted, in this sense, a "Cristinism without Cristina": an ideological Cristinism without the real support of the figure to whom they appealed or the leader

they refer to. In short, the only primary proper to that name was that of JxC, and there their right-wing version won.

The latter connects with the more general reading of the election: never before had the hard right won so many votes in Argentina: between Milei and Bullrich they accounted for almost half of the electorate. The election was marked by the death of Morena Domínguez, an 11-year-old girl, on 9 August, in a violent robbery like so many others that mark the daily life of the electorate in the so-called Conurbano bonaerense, and, more broadly, by a never-ending economic crisis that is summed up in an inflation rate of more than 100 per cent a year. In this context, Bullrich capitalised on the security crisis while Milei capitalised on that of the economy, betting on a dollarisation proposal that harks back to the era of the neoliberal Peronist Carlos Menem (1989-1999), when the value of the peso was tied by law to that of the dollar. In this context, the left outside Unión por la Patria (Peronism and allies), grouped in a Trotskyist front, also suffered a severe setback.

There was in this election something of the “return of the repressed” of 2001, a turning point in Argentine political history. Although in those days of looting, mass protests and a president - Fernando De la Rúa - who fled by helicopter from the roofs of the Casa Rosada, progressive discourses prevailed, ultraliberal solutions were on the menu and attracted significant support: it was no coincidence that Carlos Menem proclaimed, in the 2003 elections, the need to move from convertibility to the simple dollarisation of the Argentine economy, historically marked by its persistent inflation. The paradox of this whole story is that Bullrich, De la Rúa’s most unpopular minister at the time, has been reborn in these elections like a phoenix, as a kind of saviour of the nation.

The person who has most connected with the “destituyente” climate, which today has no masses on the streets but a lot of social frustration, is Milei. The libertarian not only [imported the paleolibertarian ideology of the American Murray Rothbard](#) - whose anarcho-capitalism leads him to defend the buying and selling of organs - but also the denunciation of the “caste” as the axis of his campaign, borrowed from the Spanish left-wing Podemos party. Milei, who received the support of Jair Bolsonaro, did not shy away from using national rock songs previously sung by the left (such as those of La Renga or Bersuit Vergarabat) and even the “anthem” of 2001: the refrain “Que se vayan todos... que no quede ni ni uno solo” (Let them all go... let not a single one remain), which resounded thunderously at his closing campaign rally.

But Milei’s libertarianism has another dimension, which used to go unnoticed by progressives: his idea of ‘freedom’ resonates in a popular, lower-middle class and at-risk world in which the demand for public services coexists with quite radical forms of anti-statism, associated with the moral economy of informal ‘entrepreneurialism’.

The scheme of poverty subsidies, and even the so-called “popular economy”, functions - in fact, quite well - as a protective umbrella in times of crisis, but they do not build desirable futures, today more associated with “individual effort”. Although the liberal-conservative liberalism of the 1980s, especially that of Adelina Dalesio de Viola, tried to establish a popular Thatcherism, her party appeared too elitist and her company ended up co-opted by Menemism, which managed to bring together Peronism and privatising structural reforms.

But Milei has achieved surprisingly good results in popular neighbourhoods, even in traditional Peronist areas such as La Matanza, and even more so in the provinces. In fact, he came first in 16 out of 24 provinces and in two he swept to victory, one of which is Salta, in the Andean north of Argentina.

As is often the case with other radical rightists today, Milei ended up functioning as the name of a

rebellion. Indeed, many of his voters do not want to abolish the state, buy or sell organs or children, dynamite the Central Bank, or do away with public education or health. But, as seen in the street polls of the sensationalist channel Crónica TV, saying “Milei”, in the mouths of young people and precarious workers, as well as platform workers, ended up being a kind of “empty signifier” of a moment of national polycrisis.

Contrary to what part of progressivism believes, Milei was not a product of the economic establishment or the media: businessmen became interested in him when he began to grow - and he was always seen as folkloric and unpredictable - and the media called him because he gave them *ratings*, that is, they enjoyed his popularity more than they contributed to creating it, although obviously the hours of screen time ended up increasing his performance. One exception is the La Nación newspaper’s channel, LN+, which functions as a kind of reactionary Fox News-style local news outlet.

Milei and Bullrich, unlike Rodríguez Larreta and obviously Massa, embodied a strongly anti-progressive refoundational discourse. Something similar, but ideologically inverted, to the “pink tide” of the 2000s. A weapon in the hands of the voters to dynamite the “system”, whatever that means for everyone.

On the Peronist side, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s strategy led to a dead end. The “unity” pre-candidacy of Sergio Massa, the current economy minister who has to deal with an annual inflation rate of more than 100%, was also rejected in practice by a large part of the militancy, who saw him as a “traitor” because of his recent anti-Kirchnerist past. Despite the “operational clamour” of the militancy, *Cristina* not only did not give in, but, after briefly supporting a failed candidacy of her own party, that of Interior Minister Eduardo “Wado” de Pedro, she decided to support Massa, a figure that many Kirchnerists consider “right-wing”. Although the lists for Congress are full of the faithful, [among the more “believing” Kirchnerists there is dismay](#). This is the third time (2015, 2019, 2023) that, despite *Cristina* being one of the most important politicians in the country, Kirchnerism has not run its own candidate for the presidency. Although in 2019 she was on the ticket as vice-president, Kirchnerism has always spoken of the government as if it were something alien (although this sector controlled a large part of the national budget under Alberto Fernández, now despised by the ex-mandataria). Alarm bells were already ringing in the so-called Conurbano bonaerense, where Peronism has its main strongholds. There, two elections are being held in parallel: the Peronist vote in these populous localities should serve to boost the presidential candidate, Sergio Massa, but also to guarantee the re-election of Governor Axel Kicillof, a man of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The problem is that, as one of the governor’s strategists pointed out, despondency reigns among the potential Peronist rank and file.

For different reasons, there is a climate in Peronism similar to that of 1983, when defeat gave way to renewal. But what does renewal mean today? How can the different planets of the Peronist universe - governors, mayors, unions, groupings - realign themselves? What role will Fernández de Kirchner, battered by this result, play?

In a [recent interview](#) with *Nueva Sociedad*, journalist Martín Rodríguez pointed out that Kirchnerism is, above all, a “structure of feeling”. As we pointed out in [another article](#), this “structure of feeling” not only appealed to a good part of Peronism, but also attracted the remnants of different left-wing political cultures: communists, socialists, left populists, autonomists of 2001, those nostalgic for the armed struggle of the 1970s, human rights activists. Their “seventies” discourse also managed to give a historical meaning to the political and military defeat of the dictatorship: all that suffering, which included a “decimated generation”, would have been worth it. The country was finally being re-founded. The Bicentenary, in 2010, sealed, as essayist Beatriz Sarlo pointed out in her book *La audacia y el cálculo*, the staging of this new ‘inclusive’ country at the height of Kirchnerism. But

today that structure of sentiment is seriously flawed. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner cannot explain her own decisions to the “believers”. And these “believers”, without positions or aspirations to positions, are not only the electoral but also the emotional basis of her political project. The vice-president seems to have been trapped in a somewhat curious mixture of ideologism and pragmatism. The different Peronisms seem to have neutralised each other.

The country moves forward, aghast, towards the 22 October elections. The questions are more than the answers: will Milei be able to use this result as a lever for further growth, or will the vertigo effect of an “anarcho-capitalist” who wants to dynamite the state reach the Casa Rosada activate some kind of emergency brake? Will Milei’s “madness” allow Bullrich to appear more reasonable, as happened with Marine Le Pen against the ultra Éric Zemmour in France? Will Peronism be able to show some reflex so as not to finish third again?

Analysts are resetting their GPS.

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