

An overall approach - The ultra-right governs Argentina: The end of an epoch?

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Here we will try to understand this phenomenon as the condensation of a profound process of transformation of the power relations that linked economy and politics after the crisis of 2001 and, therefore, as a sign of the end of an era.

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In what follows, we will try to develop this argument by presenting the main factors of the economic-political process that made Milei's triumph possible. In the conclusions we will summarise the overall approach, provide some elements to characterise the government based on what has happened during its first months and discuss future perspectives.

The global scenario: between the crisis of neoliberalism and the rise of the far right.

The 2008 global crisis marked the beginning, after the 2009 global recession, of a phase of weak growth (poor growth rates in the European Union, continued stagnation in Japan, slowdown in China since 2012), global pressures for productive restructuring (deepening of trends towards automation and robotisation - the so-called industry 4.0 - expansion of platform capitalism, reorganisation of work processes and changes in the structure of the exploitation relationship, etc.). This existed alongside a crisis of coordination of the responses of nation states to global events (lack of coordination of monetary and fiscal policies in the face of the 2008 economic crisis, inability to act jointly in the face of the climate crisis, difficulties in global coordination of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic) and global geopolitical tensions (Syrian crisis since 2011, tensions between the USA and China, the war in Ukraine, reactivation of the Palestinian question, etc.) (Roberts, 2018; Nava and Naspleda, 2020; Piva, 2022).

The common denominator of these different dimensions of the capitalist phase we are going through is the crisis of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has been defined in various ways. [1] But when the term is inflated to include the most varied aspects, even the most general ones, where neoliberalism is identified with any attack on the working class or project for the restoration of class power, the

essential issue is lost: the matter of the specific form of the capitalist offensive and of the subordination of labour. The meaning of the term must then be clarified or it must be abandoned.

Here we consider neoliberalism as a specific form of political domination structured by market coercion, that is, the demobilisation and individualisation of the working class and the disciplining of companies and people through mechanisms of extension and intensification of competition. The combination of restrictive monetary policies, market deregulation and trade and financial openness was essential to the articulation of these mechanisms. This definition does not ignore the role of violence in the imposition of neoliberalism, it only points out that this is a general feature of every capitalist offensive, not its specific feature. Nor does this definition ignore the fact that commercial coercion is essential to capitalist domination, based as it is on the dispossession of producers and their transformation into sellers of labour power. But it emphasises that the transformation of market coercion into the structure of political domination is specific to neoliberalism. Finally, it allows us to differentiate neoliberalism from other phenomena with which it was historically associated, such as internationalisation and productive restructuring, but which are features of a stage that includes and exceeds neoliberalism. In particular, the productive internationalisation that has taken place since the late 1960s and, above all, since the mid-1970s, is a source of tension between an increasingly global accumulation of capital and the national character of political domination, structured by national states. The weakening of the capacity to regulate accumulation in the national space and the erosion of the mechanisms of political integration of the states that this implies, tend to create problems of domination (Hirsch, 1996).

Neoliberalism was a response to these problems of domination through demobilisation and individualisation of the workers. This crisis, therefore, reopens these issues once more. An indication of this is the chronic political instability that has affected a variety of countries and continents since the global crisis of 2008, particularly the crises or problems in the functioning of political systems and the processes of polarisation. But since the late 1980s, the generalisation of neoliberal policies - through the Washington consensus - has established a de facto coordination between the various states and has consolidated an imperialist hierarchy with the USA at its head. The crisis of neoliberalism therefore explains the problems of coordination and the re-making of global geopolitical tensions, that is, the imperialist crisis.

The crisis of neoliberalism was marked by global waves of class struggle. The first, between the late 1990s and early 2000s, had its epicentre in South America, where a regional crisis of neoliberalism took place, but which was part of the massive protests against globalisation. This cycle of insurrections against neoliberalism (Thwaites Rey and Ouviaña, 2019) opened the period of left-wing neopopulist governments in the region. The second wave, between 2010 and 2012, was the first after the global crisis of 2008, and was marked by the Arab Spring and the experience of Syriza in Greece. Since the late 1980s, the class struggle has been overdetermined by the collapse of so-called real socialism. But the exhaustion of Latin American left-wing populisms, the failure of Syriza and the drowning in blood of the Arab Spring marked the character of the third global wave of protests and rebellions of 2018-2019, probably the most global of the three: the complete absence of popular alternatives.

A scenario of weak growth, pressures for capitalist restructuring, political crises, geopolitical tensions, protests and the absence of popular alternatives, this is the framework for the rise of the new right, the extreme right and the growing extension of the so-called "hybrid regimes" (Levitzki and Way, 2004). It can be said that the new authoritarianisms and the rise of the extreme right are part of the search to break a balance of forces that prevents an exit from the phase opened with the global crisis of 2008.

As we said above, the crisis of neoliberalism in much of South America dates back to the beginning

of the new century, before the global crisis of 2008. In this sense, the last expansive phase at a global level of the neoliberal period, between 2002 and 2008, was part of the conditions of possibility of the cycle of neo-populist governments and of a process of accumulation with neo-developmental characteristics, especially due to its impact on the terms of trade. This also explains the apparent paradox that the end of this cycle coincided with the global crisis of neoliberalism and, in particular, with the beginning of the slowdown in China. As such, it meant the dissolution of the global foundations of neo-populisms.

The dissolution of the foundations of an era

The dissolution of economic foundations

Since 2012, Argentina has been going through a long phase of economic stagnation and a tendency towards crisis, both with local and global causes. The global causes— weak global growth and pressures for productive restructuring, have already been presented. The local causes can be found in the tendency towards external restrictions on accumulation and the exhaustion of the local productive base, whose last profound restructuring was in the first half of the 1990s, which heightened global pressures for restructuring (Piva, 2021). As a result, fiscal adjustment and currency devaluation were not enough to relaunch accumulation and, in the absence of productive restructuring, are only capable of generating recession and spiral the relationship between devaluation and inflation. The core of the explanation of the dynamics and temporality of the stagnation phase is found in a balance of forces that has blocked successive attempts to advance in said restructuring.

However, more than ten years of stagnation and a tendency towards crisis have led to a deterioration in the living conditions of workers, particularly the poorest. How does this affect the power relations between capital and labour? It is a recognised fact in the various literature on labour and labour conflicts that there is a positive/negative relationship between the improvement/deterioration of workers' living conditions and the capacity for collective action of the working class. In Wright's terms (1983), the worsening of workers' living conditions weakens the structural capacities for action by workers as a class. While in the short term, phenomena of deprivation can lead to the rise of workers' struggles (especially in the presence of prior organisation) in the long term the inverse association prevails. In particular, the consolidation and deepening of the heterogeneity of the working class, especially the division between formal and informal workers, has affected these capacities. [2]

The dissolution of its political form: exhaustion of Kirchnerism and failure of anti-Kirchnerism

The dissolution of the economic foundations of the expansionary phase that began at the end of 2002 undermined the conditions of possibility of the neo-populist strategy of Kirchnerism, that is, the temporal (postponement) and spatial ("two models of capitalism") displacement of the antagonism between capital and labor. Since 2003, the reconstruction of state power and the construction and reproduction of consensus have developed on the basis of a strategy of gradual satisfaction of popular demands. The mismatch between expansionary fiscal and monetary policies and a process of accumulation dependent on the export of industrial commodities, with poor productivity increases and a tendency towards external restrictions resulted in unbalanced growth and entry into a regime of high inflation. The re-creation of both real and notional Peronist political policies mobilised anti-Peronist practices and representations that are still current in broad social groups, especially among

the “middle classes.”

With the expansionary phase coming to an end, Cristina Kirchner’s second government (third Kirchnerist government) sought to advance a gradual adjustment (“fine tuning”). But faced with the erosion of its bases of legitimacy, it transformed the emergency measures (exchange controls, partial closure of the economy, etc.) into a mechanism for postponing the crisis. The beginning of the stagnation phase and the evidence of exhaustion of the political strategy deepened the ruptures and desertions and, finally, led to the electoral victory of the right-wing coalition “Cambiemos” (Let’s Change.)

The Macri government attempted to restore neoliberalism, but at first it was only able to partially advance the adjustment and then the quest to implement the triple reform (labour, pension and tax) collided with popular resistance in the large mobilisations of December 2017. The years 2018 and 2019 were ones of deep crisis that ended with the return of Peronism to government.

The Frente de Todos (Everyone’s Front or FdT) was a coalition of different fractions of Peronism that internalised the pressures from above for restructuring and from below for its blockage. Once in government, it lacked direction and defined leadership, confirming that the exhaustion of Kirchnerism left Peronism without a strategy.

The exhaustion of Kirchnerism and the failure of anti-Kirchnerism dissolved the axes that had structured the political system since its reconstruction after the 2001 crisis.

The demobilisation of workers and popular forces [3]

We previously pointed out the short- and long-term relationship between the deterioration of workers’ living conditions and labour conflict. With the beginning of the phase of stagnation, and based on a process of accumulation of forces that continued after the 2001 insurrection, a cycle of high frequency of labour conflicts and an increase in the mobilisation of unions and social movements in the streets began in 2012. During 2017, in an adverse context for union negotiations, while labour conflict declined, street mobilisation, politicisation and acts of violence in a context of mobilisation grew strongly. The clashes with security forces in Plaza Congreso (Congress Square) on December 14 and 18, 2017 were the peak of this process as well as of the unity of unions and the social movements.

However, a demobilisation process began in 2018. In this process, the impact of the crisis on structural capacities for action of the working class played a relevant role, something that was already evident in the fall of labour conflicts in 2017. But so did the institutional channelling of the conflict after the relative deinstitutionalisation during 2017.

The formation of the FdT and the expectations surrounding the elections were particularly relevant in this regard. The accession of Peronism to government deepened the link between the institutionalisation of the labour conflict and popular demobilisation. The decline in the number of labor conflicts was prolonged, street protests and the unity in action of unions and the social movements were reduced. This developed at the same time, and on the basis of, the fall in real wages and the increase in informality.

Mobilisation of the Right

One of the most relevant phenomena of the last two decades was the beginning of the anti-

Kirchnerist mobilisation of the middle class, back in 2006 and 2007. It was the de facto rupture of the alliance in the streets that made possible the “piquete y cacerola” (pickets and saucepans) insurrection of December 2001. The massive coming together of these social groups behind the agrarian bourgeoisie in the 2008 tax rebellion was a qualitative shift. It was the birth certificate of a social right that would be the basis of a right-wing political alliance. But the large mobilizations (cacerolazos) of 2012 and 2013 were still necessary, which showed the growing middle class protest and the transition to the opposition of sectors that until then had voted for Peronism or at least were hesitant. Between August and October 2019, during Mauricio Macri’s re-election campaign, after the electoral catastrophe of the open, simultaneous and mandatory primaries (PASO) of Juntos por el Cambio (Together for Change or JxC, formerly Cambiemos), the mobilisation of that base showed the transformation of the social right into a political subject, which was confirmed in the protests called by the right around the Covid pandemic.

However, the failure of the right in government and the deconstructing of the connecting axis of the political system since 2003 (Kirchnerism – anti-Kirchnerism) deeply affected the political constitution of that subject. This was evident in the shift to far-right positions, first, in the figure of Patricia Bulrich, central to the pandemic and post-pandemic protests, and then, purged of any nuances, in the figure of Milei. [Perhaps a good indicator of this process is the evolution of the phenomena of collective violence: while in 2017, 24 out of 31 recorded acts of collective violence were categorisable as popular violence, in 2022 only 11 out of 27 were. Could this be an indicator of a process of accumulation of far-right social forces?]]

The demand for order

But the process of a swing towards the ultra-right could only end with a genuine growth of the demand for order, with its penetration into broad sectors of the working class.

The temporary prolongation of the crisis has effects that can only be measured at the microsocial level. The crisis ends up affecting everyday sociability, eroding the social order at the most basic levels through a whole series of dysfunctions of varying degrees. The growing insecurity linked to common crime and the rise of drug trafficking is very real and affects workers above all. In a regime of high inflation that disrupts the lives of the working class and permanently affects their income, the demand for order ends up encompassing all levels — economic, social and political — and becomes the articulator of a broad set of demands of all kinds.

During Macri’s government, this was the basis of a speech that attempted to identify the restoration of the authority of capital in the workplace and at a social level with the restoration of order. Milei’s speech deepens this identification, stripped of any reference to the republic and democracy, leaving only an authoritarian gesture.

The Elections [4]

The vote for Milei condensed all of these determinations. In the PASO of August 13 and in the general elections of October 22, 2023, LLA obtained around 30% of the valid votes cast (PASO) and valid positive votes (general), which was enough for them to win by a narrow margin in the PASO and in the general elections second, 7 points behind Peronism. However, 69.6% of eligible voters voted in the PASO (a historically low percentage in Argentina since the return of democracy) and 77.04% in the general election. The rise of Peronism in relation to the PASO indicates that a significant part of the abstention rate came from the Peronist vote. But Milei also grew between the

PASO and the general elections – which hides the percentage of valid positive votes – and this explains why, despite the enormous electoral mobilisation of Peronism in the general elections, it did not exceed 37% of valid positive votes, below its historical floor of 40%. An analysis of the vote for Milei in Greater Buenos Aires (the belt surrounding the City of Buenos Aires), which has been historically Peronist, shows the similarity of the voting profiles between LLA and Peronism. Milei had his best performance in the strongholds of Peronism and in those that were Peronist and that had oscillated between Peronism and the right since 2011.

In turn, the sociodemographic profile of the districts where Milei had his best performance in the PASO and General Elections is similar to that of Peronism: he achieved better results where there was greater informality in the labour force. This dispute between Milei and the Peronist vote is reinforced when we observe two facts from the provincial elections. First, Milei managed to win in 5 of the 6 provinces in which Peronism, which had been in power until then, lost the gubernatorial elections (Chubut, San Juan, San Luis, Santa Cruz and Santa Fe) and in 4 of the provinces that he managed to retain in elections separate from the presidential elections (La Pampa, La Rioja, Tierra del Fuego and Tucumán). In the general elections of October 22, Peronism was able to reverse the result in the 4 provinces where provincial Peronism had won the local elections, but only in one of those it had lost (Santa Cruz). Secondly, in the runoff, the LLA candidate's huge difference over Peronism (56% to 44%) is largely explained by Milei's electoral performance in the provinces of northwestern Argentina (NOA), a historical bastion of Peronism. While Macri lost in the NOA in the 2015 runoff by 57.2% to 42.8%, Milei won by 50.6% to 49.4%.

All of this shows a connection between the rise of the vote for Milei and the crisis of the Peronist vote. As Peronism has historically been the electoral tool of the working class, the crisis of the Peronist vote at the expense of the extreme right expresses, at a political level, the process of disaggregation of workers' behaviour that we saw at the level of social struggle. It is the political moment of the process of workers' demobilisation and disorganisation.

But a similar analysis of the vote for Milei in two provinces with a consolidated anti-Peronist vote (Santa Fe and Córdoba) shows that in those provinces, both in the PASO and in the general elections, the vote for Milei shares the profile of the vote of the right, the winner in previous elections. And in the runoff, he was able to attract the majority of the JxC vote at the national level.

The concentration of the Peronist and anti-Peronist votes in Milei's figure indicates, on the one hand, the destructuring of the axes that have been forming the political system since 2003, but at the same time raises the question of the political meaning of this fusion. A probable hypothesis, based on what has been said so far, is that they are united by the demand for order and that a significant part of the Milei vote (not all of it, of course) expresses an authoritarian turn in a large portion of society.

In conclusion: the authoritarian core of Milei's rise and future prospects

There is a close connection between the demobilisation of the working class and the popular movement, the increased support for the demand for order and the rise of Milei. It is about the dissolution of the social bond, the disaggregation of behaviours at the economic, social and political level and their reintegration as a mass through the figure of the authoritarian leader. The pandemic accelerated the processes of collective disaggregation, making authoritarian mediation more urgent as a reconstitutive form of the social, in a framework of persistent crisis, destructuring of the political system and absence of popular alternatives. But this process can only be condensed and reproduced through state mediation.

The authoritarian repoliticisation of the class struggle is a common feature of a whole series of

political phenomena, many of them developed within the framework of the rule of law, others in the form of “hybrid regimes”. It is nothing more than the development of authoritarian state mediation as a response to the crisis of neoliberal mechanisms of market coercion. In far-right experiences such as that embodied by Milei - and many hybrid regimes take on that character (Erdogan, Putin, Bukele and a long etcetera) - it unfolds as a tendency towards institutional rupture with bourgeois democracy, it aims - and the degree to which this tendency develops depends on the power relations it encounters - to constitute itself as an authoritarian regime based on personal leadership.

But Milei’s future raises many questions. Most of the far-right leaders who have come to power are not neoliberals (as in the case of Trump) or have been pragmatic in their objectives of monetary policy, free trade and state reform as soon as they governed (the case of Bolsonaro). His maximalism unfolds at the level of conservative and authoritarian politics. Milei’s authoritarian project demands a transformation of the State - the suppression or reduction of some functions, but, at the same time, the development or creation of others - not their minimisation. If Milei tried to fully advance his ultraliberal programme, it would undermine its own foundations. Moreover, the world we face is very different from that of the 1990s: in that time, free trade was advancing, the USA was the head of the informal empire and international financial flows and local financialisation processes made it possible to defer economic imbalances; today, free trade is stagnating in a framework of trade and currency wars, the imperialist crisis generates global instability, global financial flows are highly volatile and the deepening of local financialisation faces structural restrictions.

The first months of Milei’s government prioritised a deep offensive against workers, rather than the unification and liberalisation of the exchange market or a trade opening: a brutal devaluation of more than one hundred percent, an unprecedented fiscal adjustment based on the liquidation of pensions and salaries of state workers, a sharp recession that began to cause suspensions and layoffs in the private sector and the attempt, so far failed, to advance a deep labour reform via a decree of necessity and urgency (DNU) and a broad reform of the State through the so-called “Omnibus Law.” These two failed attempts were the result of Milei’s maximalist orientation, which has brought him into conflict with the traditional political elite, to whom he proposes subordination or confrontation. Milei’s strategy tends - objectively, more or less consciously - towards institutional rupture; although the conditions for this do not seem to exist. The Armed Forces have been a weak player in Argentine politics since the end of the military dictatorship in 1983 and support for Milei does not seem to translate, at least for now, into mobilisation and organisation to sustain a radical authoritarian turn. Nevertheless, the processes of building an authoritarian society are gradual. The Ministry of Security’s policy has limited street protests and the government’s maximalism has been accompanied by a discourse unprecedented for a president in Argentina, at least since 1983, which tends to naturalise McCarthyism, misogyny, LGBT-phobia, etc.; to encourage harassment and political persecution in networks and public institutions; and to vindicate the repressive actions of the security forces.

Some of these dimensions were present during Macri’s government, but they did not configure a systematic action as is happening now. The hypothesis that the clash with the political elite will end in an impeachment trial that will remove him from office (“soft coup”) cannot be ruled out. But what would the outcome be if there was no popular intervention? The fundamental questions, therefore, are what is the scope of the previous demobilisation process and to what extent can it be reversed? After the great mobilisations by the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour or CGT) on January 24, of the feminist movement on March 8 and of the people as a whole on March 24, we can only hope for a strong popular response from below that shakes and cracks the institutional scene, creating a new situation. That is what we hope for and that is what we are acting for.

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