

Argentina & Mauricio Macri: A Dictatorship by Democratic Means?

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Mauricio Macri, the right-wing candidate of the Cambiemos (Let's Change) Party, was elected president of Argentina in November 2015, ending twelve years of government by the center Left, Peronist governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. In the following, Caroline Kim of *Lateinamerika Nachrichten* interviews Diego Sztulwark of the *Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación Política* to discuss the relationship between Macri and the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983 and the current situation of social movements in the country.

Caro Kim: In an interview with FM La Tribu before the elections you said that Macri was the continuation of the project of the dictatorship by democratic means. Can you explain why you said this and if today, after two months of Macri's government, you would still say it?

Diego Sztulwark: I haven't changed my opinion about Macri and the group of power that accompanies him and which he represents, although I think we have to adopt a prudent attitude. When I claim that Macri represents a continuity in respect to the dictatorship, I am trying to emphasize two issues. The first is the corporate (as well as the military) aspect of the last dictatorship (1976-1983). Along with the genocide, the dictatorship was a reactionary "constituent" process: it modified state functioning in favor of financial accumulation, creating infamous laws - for example, those regulating foreign investment, or the behavior of financial entities - that are currently still in force. That legacy of the dictatorship reappears today. The second aspect of the rebirth of the dictatorship under Cambiemos's government is a completely banal culture, that worships order for the sake of order. That banality, as Arendt would say, entails an "evil." During the first months of Macri's government, we have seen the return of repressive protocols for social protest and the strengthening of security forces; we have seen an intensification of policies of massive layoffs (in the public and private sectors); we have seen how people with ties to large corporations have been given important government positions again.

This said, I should add that we must remain prudent, not in regards to the nature of the new government - although it is clear there are important novelties on this level: we are faced with a right-wing that is more modern, versatile in the world of mass media and social networks, much more attentive and lucid in everything that has to do with the production of consensus - but rather in respect to the political process as such. We must ask ourselves, how is a government like this possible in the country today? We have a lot to understand. We cannot simply say that Macri is the dictatorship. If we do not understand the current process, our attempts to stop it won't be effective. Nor can we forget that, by being successful on its own terms, this government can serve as a laboratory for the region.

CK: Would you have predicted that the new government would start its term with this shower of (anti-democratic) measures? Was there something that surprised you?

DS: Without having anticipated the autocratic toughness of many of the measures that are being taken, I don't think there have been any real surprises. The government acts with considerable rationality according to its own terms. It tries by all means and advances where it sees there is less resistance. In any case, the surprises should be situated on another level: in the docility during the previous process of the selecting candidates - all of the candidates with real chances of winning (Macri, but also Peronists Scioli and Massa) lacked the personal or political resources to confront the control that emerges from the continuous crisis at the level of the global market -; in Macri's triumph in the country's three main states (the Federal Government, the City of Buenos Aires, and the Province of Buenos Aires); and in the ease in which the government is dismantling the policies of the Kirchner governments. These three surprises exacerbate the fact that the capacity of popular resistance is no longer effective and therefore the government is able to orient its politics to the total submission to a new version of neoliberalism suited for the current South American context.

CK: What is the situation in the country, how has the political climate developed during these two months? What do social movements, the base, say? What are they most critical of?

DS: I think the social organizations, like all of us, are still trying to understand what happened. Going at full speed, they are trying to take account of the Kirchnerist political process (and what many call an "end of cycle") and to better understand what is coming. Many organizations were part of the government and now they find themselves subjected to a new dynamic. I think that we are going from a phase of initial perplexity to one where it is becoming increasingly urgent to define new instruments to put limits on the government's offensives: above all, in terms of defending workers' earning power, the anti-repressive aspect, and confronting the strengthening of agribusiness. The first national strike against the government (public sector employees, teachers, the key trade unions of the CTA) will be this week and I think that on March 24th (the 40th anniversary of the coup) there will be a massive expression of the rejection of state policies on streets across the country.

CK: How does the role of social protest change with the new government? What happens in terms of the criminalization of protest? Is there more mobilization now? How do you see the development of social movements in the near future?

DS: It appears to me that new modes of social struggle will be affirmed although it is still not easy to anticipate them. The organizations that were not part of the government have real contact with the popular perceptions and problems and experience in engaging in politics without support from the state. Those that were part of the government, on the other hand, are still processing the impact of the new situation. Besides the large unions, which tend to support the new government, other more combative ones have emerged, based on grassroots and assembly processes. Highly interesting political reflections have also developed from within the territorial organizations. It is to hope for that the experience of struggle coming from the mid 1990s can now be recovered in a different context, of unprecedented political aggressiveness from the state, of the retraction of the so-called "progressive" governments in the region, but also of the undeniable triumph of a mode of accumulation that ties together the government of finances, neoextractivism and popular inclusion through increasing consumption. Is this model going to be replaced by another or will its terms be reformulated? I think that the movements that know how to read the context are going to tend to affirm their presence and effectiveness.

CK: Would it be possible to compare the current situation a little with the situation after

2001? In terms of organization, mobilization, militancy? What are the similarities, differences?

DS: I don't think there can be a direct comparison. In 2001 there was massive exclusion and hunger. There was also a convergence of different, highly effective autonomous struggles (the piquetero struggle, forms of survival through barter, thousands of recuperated factories, the formidable diffusion of human rights struggles, etc.). Today the situation is quite different. The Kirchners' government included many people in consumption through benefits programs and the creation of precarious jobs. Additionally, the circuit of informal economies grew significantly. In 2001, there was a response based on a practice of community, united around the "ollas populares" in neighborhoods. This is not what we see today in the territories. The capacity of creating organization, today, requires a very high level of preparation to confront the territorialized violence related to the pursuit of rent. There has been a dramatic increase in patriarchal, racist, police violence and it presents a real challenge for militant organizations. That said, 2001 does not stop returning (perhaps it never completely disappeared), because 2001 is the memory of subjectivities that inhabit the crisis, that extract their political and subjective power from the crisis.

CK: What is public opinion (even in the most conservative sectors) of the government? Do they condemn Macri's style of government? Is there a part of the sectors that voted for Macri that are now distancing themselves?

DS: There are critiques of a certain institutional carelessness, people harmed by the layoffs, concern about inflation and price increases, awareness of the loss of purchasing power. But, even so, support for the government still predominates. And he has lost some support. On the contrary, important sectors of Peronism are helping Macri to govern and the president's popularity, according to the polls, remains high. How can this support for the new government be understood? Put in perspective, it is not easy to begin responding to this question without taking the following factors into account: 1. The precaritization of the previous government's processes of "social inclusion;" 2. The increase of a "subjectivation" tied more to consumption (to a type of standardized consumption linked to the generalization of rent) than to citizenship, where values linked to security and a widespread desire for normalcy (a demand for moral order against corruption, institutional order against the exchange rate "cepo," order in the streets against insecurity and the "piqueteros," etc.); 3. The weakening of autonomous politicization as a form of collective processing and its replacement by a polarization in which the overwhelming presence of the mass media is responded to by a type of militancy that is more self-absorbed and obedient to the governing group.

CK: Is there fear among the sectors that are now in the opposition? For example, in the thousands of public sectors workers who have been laid off? Are the layoffs part of an "anti-Kirchnerist revenge?" What about the criminalization of activism? What role does the famous "rift" between Kirchnerists and anti-Kirchnerists play? How does the new government make discursive use of the concept of crisis to legitimate political measures?

DS: Anxiety and fear due to job loss predominate. The layoffs have been massive and cruel. Thousands of people are living with the daily threat of losing their income. The layoffs are entirely revanchist. The government argues that the populist policies brought about an increase in unproductive employment which caused the deficit to increase. It argues that this can be resolved by throwing out workers that are Kirchnerist activists. The government has proposed to dismantle Kirchnerism, to take the Kirchnerism out of Peronism. The crisis plays a justifying role, as a way of requesting time, trust. President Macri, who campaigned on promising to improve the standard of republicanism, has made the exception the juridical basis of almost all of his measures during these first few months.

CK: What do you consider to be “new” about Macri? What is dangerous about him?

DS: What is new, from my perspective, is to have channeled the formation of a desire for order and normalcy that was growing as a conservative response to the 2001 crisis. This novelty, I think, basically consists of two operations: understanding that this “desire for regulation” was a promising place from which to read and incorporate social discontent, maximizing the use of technologies of social penetration to tune into and provide a common code for very diverse situations.

CK: How do you think the political culture will change with the new government?

DS: I think Macriism capitalizes on the formation of a culture of order that has been growing for years. It has, in any case, known how to read it, is in tune with it, and channels it. It makes this desire for order into the general common sense. The force of this normalization is devastating. Kirchnerism (and much of the Left) thought that the hegemonic dispute was on the order of ideology, ideas, in the theoretical or intellectual sense. The current victory of Macriism, however, is principally at the level of senses, of perception.

The desire for order is also an extreme naturalization of social, ethnic, classist differences and it supposes a pathologization of any desire to flee or subvert that order. In this regard, it is not a culture of government but of society, that the government takes advantage of because it fits well with its own, based on the idea of modernization as adaptation to the world market. That adaptation is produced through an irritating, deproblematizing aesthetic and rhetoric that promises a “revolution of joy” with yellow balloons.

CK: How do you expect the political situation in the country to continue? Can the government keep using this discourse of reconciliation and joy when conflicts arise? Will social protest strengthen in this struggle? Could we say, as you have written, that it is possible for the militant Left to become more popular and open space for a new rebellion?

DS: It is not easy to say. Argentine history shows that in situations like this the political dynamic depends on how long it takes for Peronism to unify and decide where it wants to go. For the moment, ruling around values like unity and conciliation credits the government, and among those that don't form part of it there is a marked division between those who propose engaging in resistance (emphasizing the idea of conflict) and those who posit themselves as opposition (emphasizing the game of institutions and the moderation that their interpretation of political time seems to impose on them). All of this is easy to describe. But this is not the most important, rather what matters is the lesson that we can extract from the entire political cycle, which started in 2001, at the national (as well as the regional) level. I would put it like this: What are we, those of us who confirm that politics is only transformative when it is articulated with subjectivities in crisis, going to do?

Diego Sztuljwark, April 11, 2016

P.S.

* <https://viewpointmag.com/2016/04/11/argentina-a-dictatorship-by-democratic-means/>

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