

Opinion – Argentina's Javier Milei Shows his Teeth

Written by Richard M. Sanders

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RICHARD M. SANDERS, JUL 4 2025

Argentine President Javier Milei is riding high. His tough economic program has eliminated the government's chronic deficits and dramatically cut inflation. The International Monetary Fund has given him its seal of approval with a huge new loan enabling him to eliminate burdensome exchange controls. And he has begun to aggressively prune an overblown, politicized bureaucracy. Despite the real pain which the public has endured as the price of his reforms, he continues to poll well, and has had success in regional elections, most recently in the May 18 race for seats in the Buenos Aires city council. Milei successfully turned this local contest into a referendum on his rule, naming his press spokesman to lead his party's list, and has taken an unexpectedly wide victory as a definitive public endorsement.

At the same time former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, whose leftist populist approach to economics represents the antithesis of Milei's austerity policies, has run out of appeals in a long-standing corruption case and has begun serving a six year sentence under house arrest. Her supporters have rallied in front of her apartment building in Buenos Aires, and while she is barred from running for office again, her travails have given her, at least for the moment, a measure of political relevance which had been slipping away from her. But internal power struggles are intensifying among the Peronists, who lack any coherent program with which to challenge Milei. Thus, for the moment he stands astride Argentine political life as his opponents try to regroup.

But Milei may be drawing some of the wrong lessons from his strong position, cranking up his always hot rhetoric and giving free rein to an authoritarian streak which has never been far from the surface. One example: Shortly after the recent election in Buenos Aires he issued an executive order greatly increasing the number of sectors in which the right to strike is forbidden or severely limited. (Whether this will survive a court challenge remains to be seen as it has already been overruled at the trial court level.)

A directive setting forth the collection priorities for the state intelligence service has surfaced which has some ominous elements. In addition to listing obvious areas such as terrorism, foreign policy and cyber-threats, it also highlights actors who may generate "loss of confidence" in the government's economic program and those engaged in manipulating public opinion in electoral events. At the same time another executive order has given the Federal Police new powers to investigate without judicial order activities on websites and other digital spaces.

It is true that monitoring efforts to generate false information or images is a new frontier for intelligence and law enforcement agencies worldwide, but this broad remit to monitor critics has raised concerns, especially as Argentina has a long history of such entities being used for narrow political purposes and the suppression of dissent.

Milei has not been shy about harshly denouncing those he sees as undermining his policies, even including conservative economists who, while being generally supportive, have expressed concern over some of their specific elements. He has dismissed these critics as "econo-loudmouths." And when award-winning film star and director Ricardo Darín lamented high prices, specifically mentioning empanadas, the meat pies which are a staple of the Argentine diet, Milei, who considers the reduction in inflation his signal achievement, was quick to respond with insults, calling him "ignorant and a low grade (political) operator."

Milei's distaste for Argentina's media has long been apparent, reaching an extreme when he said: "We don't hate reporters enough." When called out for this comment, rather than apologize, he produced a long list of alleged

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journalistic sins, such as “lying, slandering and injuring without allowing the harmed person to defend himself.” In this context it is no wonder that his intelligence and police guidelines raise suspicions.

While denouncing the press’s failings, Milei has sponsored his own network of internet influencers who are prepared to go even beyond his own rhetorical excesses. Prominent among them is “Fat Dan,” who has proclaimed himself to be Milei’s “armed wing” and who has been accused of “digital harassment” by the Argentine Journalism Forum. Hugo Alconada, one of Argentina’s most distinguished journalists, has recounted how since he broke the story of the new intelligence guidelines in prestigious daily newspaper *La Nacion*, he has been subjected to attacks by unknown parties that have included hacking his electronic mail and enrolling him in pornographic websites.

Milei’s harsh, winner-take-all style was in evidence at the May 25 Te Deum mass at the Metropolitan Cathedral commemorating Argentina’s struggle for independence. He pointedly refused to acknowledge his Vice President (once an ally but with whom he is now feuding) and the mayor of Buenos Aires (whose list was bested by Milei’s at the recent municipal election). For his part, the Archbishop delivered a sermon lamenting that “smears, mistreatment, and defamation seem to be common occurrences.”

Argentines seem prepared to overlook, at least for now, Milei’s worst impulses, rightly seeing his economic reforms as a last ditch effort to turn the country around. And there are still checks on his power. He lacks a solid majority in Congress; the courts, although hardly perfect, are independent; and Argentina’s media remain undaunted despite his non-stop abuse.

But Milei is seeking more room to proceed with his vision of a transformed Argentina. His own party, “Liberty Advances,” currently has only a small presence in Congress and he must rely on other centrist and conservative parties for support which has usually but not always been available. But he hopes to do much better in October when half of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and a third of those in the Senate will be in play. And although he has failed this far to gain approval from the Senate in his attempt to name two new justices to the Supreme Court, he will doubtless try again.

How Milei would behave in an environment of greater freedom of action than he now enjoys is an open question. Latin America has seen the rise of democratically elected authoritarians in countries from Venezuela to Nicaragua and El Salvador. To avoid this fate Argentines will need to find ways to benefit from the good which Milei can do while rejecting the bad.

About the author:

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