

The politics of protest in Argentina

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democracia **Abierta**

la sección latina de **openDemocracy** 

Julián Rebón 12 December 2018 (2018-12-12T10:51:33+00:00)

Political life in Argentina is characterized by a particularly active culture of social protest. This is a key element to understanding political dynamics throughout the 21st century.

Español



Student protest against Macri's reforms. Argentina 2018. Wikimedia Commons.

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The evolution of Argentina in the last few years highlights the dispute for territory between opposing social forces. There are three stages to this dispute which broadly describe the swings of the country's political pendulum.

The first stage corresponds to the period marked by the crisis of 2001: it expresses the collapse of the neoliberal hegemony of the 1990s. It includes President Fernando De la Rúa's (1999-2000, Radical Civic Union-Alliance) resignation in December of that year and it stretches up to 2003, when a new elected government takes charge.

The second stage corresponds to the cycle of the governments of the Justice Party (PJ) and the Front for Victory (FPV), beginning with the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), and then followed by that of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015).

This is the cycle during which a critical relationship with the neoliberal legacy is attempted through the promotion of a socio-economic model more closely related to the home market and with a greater State role in the running of the economy and in managing social protections.

Finally, the last stage begins with the inauguration of Mauricio Macri (Republican Proposal: Let's Change) in 2015 which, honoring the name of the electoral coalition, carries out policies contrasting with the previous cycle and resumes the neoliberal reform agenda.

Disobedient crowds

In Argentina, the 21st century began, in historical terms, with the so-called crisis of 2001. The mechanism of the crisis leading to the collapse of the neoliberal hegemony cannot be reduced to only its economic components; the impossibility of paying back a growing external debt, the multi-faceted resistance to adjustment plans and their social consequences must also be taken into account.

It is particularly important to note that the social composition of this resistance, as it is usually the case in processes of resistance to neoliberalism, was multiple and varied.

There were strikes, mobilizations and a growing wave of looting in shops, and the protest reached its highest point on December 19 and 20. The President declared a state of siege on the night of the 19 to try and contain collective action. Far from its expected result, there was a sudden surge of generalized civil disobedience.

The challenge to the presidential move was a claim for his resignation: "Let's throw them all out, let's not leave a single one there" became the slogan of the mobilizations.

Its epicenter was the middle layers of the population - the original social base of the government: in several neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, the response to the President's speech announcing the state of siege was a massive banging of pots and pans and spontaneous demonstrations which spread rapidly throughout the city.

The challenge to the presidential move was a claim for his resignation: "Let's throw them all out, let's not leave a single one there" became the slogan of the mobilizations. On December 20, the mobilizations continued, although this time they were invoked by social and political organizations. Violent police action to clear the vicinity of the government buildings, led to intense clashes with demonstrators.

In the end, the President was forced to resign due to lack of support and legitimacy to continue in office. The PJ, the main opposition party, imposed the terms of the succession. After a chaotic succession of several provisional presidents, Eduardo Duhalde, PJ senator and a former presidential candidate who had been defeated by de La Rúa in 1999, assumed the presidency.

This frustration continued for several months. A tendency of autonomy in the streets could be noticed among different social groups. Neighborhood assemblies sought to extend citizen outrage aiming at social change.

Unemployed workers collectively took over the companies they used to work for before the crisis, and the picket movement which had emerged in the late 1990s gathered strength and widened its mobilization capacity. This was a time when the public space became the stage for assemblies and direct action. It was also the time for experimenting and searching for alternative forms of production and culture.

The protest posed a serious challenge to the provisional government. One of the ways in which the government responded was by using repression.

The murder of two militants in a picket protest on June 26, 2002, unleashed a wave of indignation and protest which prompted a change in the government's strategy: it called for elections as a way out of the crisis of legitimacy. President Kirchner would be enshrined into government during these elections.

The resistance to the processes of expropriation and exclusion, and the actions challenging the existing political order, severely curtailed the viability of government policies and created the scenario which led to the fall of de la Rúa.

Even though other political actors and political moves played a key role in his fall and in ushering a political transition, the way in which it happened cannot be explained without the presence of collective action in the streets – an action which had more to do with dismissing than establishing: it expressed a power of veto rather than the capacity to build a political alternative.

These events during times of the crisis, however, left a deep imprint: a legacy of a new culture of battle with a strong tendency for direct action and disobedience to authority which could be activated and recreated in the future.

But, above all, they left the idea that the smoke of politics in the streets can always come back dormant in the citizens' collective memory. Collective action thus became established as a dismissing threat for the future.

Mobilizations from “above”

The political cycle of Néstor Kirchner's and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's governments is marked by the imprint of the prevailing tendencies from the previous period, and belongs within the wide range of experiences of Latin American progressive governments.

The origin of Néstor Kirchner's government was marked by the general crisis of 2001. Even though it did not represent the groups which had mobilized during the crisis, it sought to recompose the country's social order by selectively retaking the claims of the social struggles of the previous period, and proposing a reformist agenda.

In doing so, politics regained some space and some degree of autonomy in relation to economic power. Politically, it promoted openness and recognition for the mobilized actors, and actively worked towards granting their demands. This is why the trade union

movement, the human rights movement and other social organizations gave the government significant support throughout the cycle.

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These interests manifested themselves for the first time clearly in 2008 in the so-called "farmers' conflict". This conflict managed to politicize, mobilize and polarize society like no other throughout this cycle.

In March of that year, the recently elected Cristina Fernández de Kirchner government, aimed at resolving a fiscal problem in the making, raised the rate of the withholding tax on the export of several grains, especially soya, and linked its fluctuation to international prices.

The main agribusiness corporate entities united against this measure, claimed for its derogation, summoned their affiliates to refrain from commercializing grains and meat, and established road blocks to ensure the effectiveness of this decision.

Thus, a social movement was created which, similarly to those developed by the popular sectors, focused on mobilization, direct action and assembly practice. The conflict exceeded however the agrarian sectors and mobilization spread to encompass social and political opposition to the government, especially by the sectors which were feeling dissatisfied with its reformist measures.

In an urban country such as Argentina, the conflict involved and aligned the population as a whole, paralyzed the country and depleted the supplies to the main urban centers.

The government finally requested parliamentary approval of the withholding tax measure, but it was rejected in the Senate. A year later, at the general elections, support for the government decreased markedly and it lost its parliamentary majority.

The second great moment of the mobilizations from above is the cycle of pot-and-pan banging in 2012 after the overwhelming reelection of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner with more than 54% of the popular vote the year before. These protests reached their highest expression on September 13 and November 8, 2012, and April 18, 2013.

Unlike the farmers' conflict, there was no specific issue for them other than anger and opposition to the government. Unlike the pot-and-pan banging of 2001, its social base was not the government's own; on the contrary, even though they were massive, they did not manage to transcend the core of the social opposition to the government and the upper-middle strata of the population.

The main impact of these outraged crowds was in keeping the social opposition to the government mobilized and in wearing down its electoral triumph, thus hindering the possibility of its consolidation of a hegemonic process up against a weak political opposition.

The mobilizations from above fulfilled a function of social opposition. They reached a peak during two non-electoral years in which the political opposition was particularly weak, in 2008 and 2012.

In 2015, the calendar moved the axis from social to political opposition, and the cycle came to an end with the elections of that year which were won in a tight runoff by Mauricio Macri, who represented the most antagonistic political exponent to the Kirchner project.

Popular resistance to neoliberal restructuring

From the start, the Macri government has sought to implement a restructuring of Argentine capitalism in a neoliberal sense economically and politically in terms of social discipline: a framework for developing a growing repressive policy of the popular sectors.

One of the most significant obstacles to this restructuring program is social protest. The trade union movement, the movements of the people's economy, human rights organizations, the renewed women's movement, are the main components of the wide umbrella of resistance to government-driven sociopolitical reforms.

A series of social protest in December 2017 clearly show, yet again, their political role. After its victory in the mid-term legislative elections in October, the government redoubled its commitment to counter-reform, with employment, social security and taxation as its core.

The pension reform, which consisted in changing the rate of pension increase, meaning cutting them, constituted the axis of resistance. On the day the reform was to be discussed in Congress, a massive mobilization by unions and social organizations outside of Congress was fiercely repressed.

But most of the protesters managed to reorganize and re-entered the square. In the end, the session was adjourned as the opposition demanded.

A few days later, broad social opposition to the reform manifested itself again in another massive mobilization before a new congressional session, including a general strike. The demonstration quickly turned into a confrontation between the security forces and demonstrators in their hundreds who attacked the police columns with sticks and stones.

The repression did not dampen the indignation and, at nightfall, Buenos Aires and other cities were shaken by pot-and-pan banging against the government's pension reform.

The protesters tried to remain in the square despite the repression until, finally, the intensity of police action managed to clear the area. Subsequently, the security forces went on a hunt for demonstrators in the city center and deployed unusual violence, of a kind unseen since December 2001.

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Finally, the project with some minor changes was passed. The reform went ahead, but not without costs even among Macri voters. It also damaged the agreement principle existing between the government and the leadership of the country's main trade union regarding labor reform, which has forced the government to withdraw the proposal from being debated for the time being.

The result of the conflict shows that social protest, in conditions of weakness of the political opposition, is a key to channeling social unrest. It has created obstacles and forced some palliative changes to the government's planned reforms but has been unable to halt the general trend of social change.

The images of smoking barricades in Buenos Aires's city center and of citizens protesting with pots and pans in the neighborhoods, vividly recall some of the postcards of 2001 – they show the validity of protest as a citizens' political vehicle in Argentina today, and also the difficulties to contain it through repression.

Final thoughts

In Argentina, in recent years, social protest has become an informal political mechanism which complements the classical institutions of representative democracy, for expressing demands to the institutional political system.

One of its central impacts in political terms is negative due to its main role is the obstruction of government actions. Given the weakness of political parties, particularly those in the opposition, protest appears as a privileged form of social opposition at various stages.

This entails that mass protest cycles draw their strength from social sectors which are not those who support the governmental alliances. In 2001, their dismissing character reached such an intense peak precisely because a substantive part of the government's social base was mobilized against it.

On the other hand, the population's tendency to protest makes protest a relevant factor to be taken into account for implementing public policies. Protest as a likelihood significantly affects government decisions in several areas.

To summarize, attesting the political relevance of the negative side of protest does not imply ignoring its impact in determining policies or incorporating new demands into the public agenda, and its role in other areas such as culture and unions. We have attempted to argue the strong relevance of one of its impacts.

In our opinion, protest has resulted more in the dismissal of rather than the installation of governments, in resisting policies that in ensuring their effective implementation. But pushing aside the hierarchy of impacts, protest is, undoubtedly, one of the forms that the discussion on the destiny of the nation has taken.

Above and beyond the current government's resolve, it is a struggle which remains open, and has the streets as its privileged stage for expressing itself.

About the author

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