
Argentina Finds Its Voice on Human Rights

Look for Argentina's new president to get tough on Cuba and Venezuela.

BY **FEDERICO MERKE**

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In addition to inheriting an economy in recession when he took office on December 10, President Mauricio Macri inherited a foreign policy short on vision and defined mainly by domestic concerns. He is clearly planning to make significant changes. His presidency is likely to have a particular impact on Argentina's stance on democracy and human rights both at home and abroad — even if it's still unclear just how far and how quickly Macri will move away from the legacy of his predecessors.

Argentina's last two presidents, the Kirchners (first Néstor and then Cristina Fernández de Kirchner) followed an ideological, confrontational foreign policy, declaring the United States, Europe, the IMF, and the World Bank to be hostile to Argentine interests. On democracy and human rights, however, things looked different. The Kirchners continued the legacy previous Argentine leaders established in the years following Argentina's 1990 return to democracy of developing or supporting new instruments for the protection of human rights at various international and regional organizations. Argentina was been extensively involved in democracy promotion in the Americas, and committed itself to pro-democratic regional agreements such as the [Ushuaia Protocol of Mercosur](#), the [Inter-American Democratic Charter](#), and the [Additional Protocol of UNASUR](#). But for both ideological and strategic reasons, the Kirchners refused to comment on the human rights situation in Cuba and Venezuela.

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Macri has already begun making changes on the foreign policy front. Early in his campaign, he promised to strengthen institutions, introduce more pro-business policies, cut deals with foreign creditors, and realign Argentina's foreign policy away from Venezuela and Iran and closer to the United States and Europe. His appointment of Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra, a well-regarded former aide to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, signals his resolve to put Argentina back in the corridors of multilateral diplomacy. Further, having placed trade issues within the newly created Ministry of Production, Macri has signaled that the Foreign Ministry will adopt a more political standpoint addressing international norms (e.g. democracy and human rights) international security, and the environment.

With respect to democracy and human rights, Macri stated during his campaign that his policy on these matters would broadly follow the principles set out by the Kirchners. This became apparent when conservative *La Nación* newspaper published an editorial the day after Macri's election victory calling for a halt to the trials of people guilty of political murders and disappearances during the right-wing dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s. The popular outcry, including from some of *La Nación*'s own staff, was overwhelming, and Macri's chief of staff, Marcos Peña, openly rejected the proposal.

But Macri will probably depart from the past in some important ways. To start with, he is poised to abandon the reigning code of silence among like-minded left-wing governments that have eroded freedom of the press and other human rights. At his first press conference as president-elect, Macri openly criticized Venezuela and the human rights abuses of its *chavista* government. He called for the suspension of Venezuela from Mercosur, a key regional trade bloc, on the grounds that the country had broken the bloc's democratic clause. Macri said he would ask Mercosur members to press Venezuela to release high-profile opposition leaders like former mayors Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma.

In the meantime, Venezuela's mid-term congressional elections in early December eased fears of electoral fraud by giving the opposition a majority of seats in the National Assembly. This was the worst-ever defeat for the *chavista* movement, yet Maduro quickly accepted the results. Thus, Macri decided not to emphasize Mercosur's democracy clause, and turned instead to human rights abuses. Here Venezuela's shortcomings are legion. Between 1995 and 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned Venezuela sixteen times for cases of extrajudicial killings by police and soldiers; violations of freedom and speech, and other human rights abuses. Calling the OAS an instrument of American imperialism, Maduro withdrew Venezuela from the Inter-American Court and Commission of Human Rights.

Thus, Macri's pointed stance condemning human rights abuses in Venezuela at the Mercosur Summit in Paraguay on December 21, 2015 might be construed as an attempt to open up a regional venue to monitor human rights. Indeed, one of the outcomes of the Mercosur Summit was the signing of a declaration in defense of the "unrestricted support of human rights." The statement also included a call to establish a human rights monitoring group at the Mercosur level. So if Macri follows through, and domestic conditions in Venezuela worsen, the resulting shift could prompt South American governments to change their positions towards Venezuela. Chile, Peru, Colombia and Uruguay might be Macri's initial partners in pressing Maduro's government.

Despite the region's progress toward political liberalization in the 1980s, democracy has become a contested concept in Latin America over the past decade. Various left-of-center leaders have put forward visions that challenge the dominant Western liberal democracy paradigm. If Macri makes good on his recent statements, a renewed push to rethink and promote democracy and human rights in South America could be on the way.

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In the photo, Argentina's President Mauricio Macri dances on a balcony of the Casa Rosada government palace after the inauguration ceremony in Buenos Aires on December 10, 2015.

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