

The “New” Extreme Right in Latin America

by **Enrique Arias and Jo-Marie Burt**

On November 19th, 2023 Javier Milei was elected president of Argentina, winning 56% of the popular vote in run-off elections. His campaign called for a radically libertarian economic agenda that included eliminating the central bank, dollarizing the economy, and massive cuts in social programs, retirement and pension funds, among other things. His public safety policies focused on empowering security forces by increasing military and police budgets, adopting a zero- policy tolerance towards crime, reducing regulations for firearms markets, re-establishing the military’s “moral authority” lost after the fall of Argentina’s brutal dictatorship in 1983, and closing the ESMA Museum and Memory Site, which is based at the former Naval Mechanics School, the site of some of the dictatorship’s most infamous crimes (Lambertucci 2023).

The election of Milei in Argentina—a 40-year-old democracy that has experienced several transfers of power between parties, where a consensus rejecting the military dictatorship appeared firm, and where progressive rights were expanding—draws renewed attention to the rise of a new and complex reactionary right in Latin America. Ultra-conservative groups railing against “gender ideology” and “cultural Marxism,” and steeped in hyper-nationalism and anti-globalist rhetoric, have gained traction in institutional politics as well as at the societal level around the globe. But the extreme right in Latin America is also very much a home-grown phenomenon: in part a reaction to the “Pink Tide” governments that overtook the region in recent years, even as it is deeply rooted in the colonial legacies of Christianity, patriarchy, and white supremacy embedded in concepts such as *hispanidad*.

Given this context, we invited several colleagues to reflect on the ascendance of extreme right movements and parties in Latin America for this issue of LASA Forum. This dossier dialogues with the special program track on the extreme right in Latin America for LASA2024, as well as the broader theme of the Congress, ***Reacción y resistencia: imaginar futuros posibles en las Américas***. Our objective is to foster debate regarding the rise of the extreme right in the Americas. What explains the rise of extreme, right-wing ideologies and political movements? How “new” is the extreme right in Latin America, and what differentiates it from the “traditional” right? What types of threats does the “alt-right” pose to democracy and broader understanding of rights in the region? What role do international ties play in supporting the far right in the Americas, and how do these ties drive right-wing politics? How does the extreme right today express itself in culture and to what extent are cultural and social activism important to the right? What role do ties to the military and paramilitary groups play in advancing the far right’s agenda?

Today’s extreme right-wing politics in Latin America is embodied by Argentina’s Milei, El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele and former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, as well as also-rans who remain key political players, including Rodolfo Hernandez in Colombia, Rafael López Aliaga in Peru, Guido Manini Ríos in Uruguay, and José Antonio Kast in Chile. The extreme right has a marked populist and putatively anti-elitist rhetoric. These leaders are savvy about social media (Goldstein 2019), engage in revanchist cultural politics, and are well-networked internationally. As in the past, some on the Latin American right embrace ties to

the military and paramilitary groups to advance their agenda. Many have hardline, punitive approaches to controlling crime, including the use of state of emergency decrees and the militarization of public security. While far-right politicians participate in democratic elections and often succeed in them, they generally lack a serious commitment to democratic norms and institutions, and once in power, may use democratic institutions to concentrate power and weaken democracy from within. The right has also promoted a “culture wars” approach to politics, for example through its embrace of so-called gender ideology, which claims that reforms benefiting women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as reproductive rights and the right to same-sex marriage, are the result of an imposed system of beliefs that threaten “Christian values” and corrupts society (Mayka and Smith 2021). Indeed, many of these new right-wing movements and parties are a reaction against progress made in delivering rights to women, sexual minorities, and historically excluded non-white majorities in the region (Escorfier, Payne, and Zuliver 2023; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021).

The ascendance of extreme right movements and parties has been analyzed extensively in the Global North. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the election and government of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise and fall of the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom and the 2016 Brexit referendum), the election of far-right governments in several European countries including Italy and Poland, the onset on electoral authoritarianism Hungary, and the more limited but still significant electoral successes of the Alternative for Germany (AFD) in German, and the National Front (FN) in France.¹ The literature on the rise of this new extreme right-wing politics in the Global North focuses in part on the complex adjustments imposed on the welfare states in these countries by the economic challenges of globalization that have moved jobs offshore,

and the related challenges posed by migration (Mudde and Rovira 2013). The stories told in these narratives focus on increasingly local working classes—often ethnically homogeneous—that have been displaced from high-quality work as jobs move abroad, and who feel threatened by migrants they perceive to be taking “their” jobs, all amidst neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state (Pierson 2017; McKenzie 2017). Extreme right parties position themselves as representatives of ethnically homogenous people who are “native” to their respective countries (Brubaker 2017).

While the “alt-right” in the Global North has found traction by focusing on migration, Latin America’s far right has had greater success focusing on domestic law and order issues and the “culture war” posturing described above. The Bolsonaro administration openly promoted nostalgia for Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-1985), promoting the flawed idea that brutal policing can resolve the country’s serious crime and violence problems. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele’s administration has pursued a visually striking and highly repressive gang control policy based at least partially on negotiation focused on restoring order in that country. The victims of these policies are disproportionately poor and from these countries’ non-white majorities. Authoritarian and populist leaders are often able to forge alliances with populations that live in fear of crime, often including people from poor, targeted communities who often suffer the most from crime. By dividing citizens between “good” and “bad” and offering the hope of security, the right-wing and populist leaders mobilize a base of support even among some in communities directly suffering from their policies.

This dossier includes contributions from LASA members analyzing this “new” extreme Latin American right from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Collectively, these articles help us better understand the nature, objectives, and impact of the contemporary right in its political, economic, social and cultural manifestations.

¹ On the United States, see Pierce (2017). On the UK, see McKenzie (2017). On Italy, see D’Alimonte (2019). On Poland, see Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016). On Hungary, see Ágh (2015). On Germany, see Schwander and Manow (2017). On France, see Facchini and Jacek (2021).

Some of the topics that these essays examine include how inequality and the failure of both center-left and center-right parties to address this contribute to the rise of the new right, the relationship between a growing disenchantment with democracy, nostalgia for bygone dictatorships and the rise of extreme right-wing movements and parties, the ways that religious change and extremism has contributed to new political alliances strengthening a different type of far-right politics, and the way Latin America's far-right movements are being supported and promoted by global right-wing networks (Harris 2023).

In his essay, "El ascenso de la ultraderecha en América Latina: inesperado, rápido y duradero," Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser argues that the far right is here to stay in Latin America because its leaders have found a niche apart from both the center-left and right. The extreme right in Latin America, Rovira argues, is hemmed in by the enduring problem of inequality, which has been exacerbated by the neoliberal economic model championed by the traditional right in the region since the 1980s. Growing displeasure with the "Washington Consensus" brought center-left parties to power across the region; their policies even made some progress in tackling some of these durable inequalities, but the problem persists. The far-right refocuses the question of inequality, blaming self-dealing elites, while also emphasizing "traditional values" and seeking to mobilize voters' cultural and political resentments against sexual minorities, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendant citizens in support of reactionary policies. All of this, Rovira argues, is abetted by a robust international far-right network that now regularly meets and provides support to these leaders around the globe.

Anthony Pereira's essay, "Understanding Right-Wing Populism (or the Extreme Right)," takes up many of these same questions, delving into the nature of these transnational networks. He argues that to understand the far right in Latin America today we need to examine its historical and transnational roots. There is a long tradition of radical populisms on the left and the right in Latin America, Pereira argues, including

such notable examples as Juan Perón, Getúlio Vargas, Alberto Fujimori, and Abdalá Bucaram. In many ways today's far right roots itself in that tradition. Pereira notes that right-wing populism constructs cross-class coalitions in different countries by finding grievances to polarize the population to peel off voters from other electoral coalitions. This populism, for Pereira, is nested in a global right-wing epistemic community that Latin America's right-wing leaders can draw from to reinforce and advance their ideas.

In "'Gender Ideology', Refeudalization, and the *Reproductive Reconquista*," Gabriela Arguedas-Ramírez examines how the far right globally and in Latin America use debates about gender and sexuality to advance their agenda. Arguedas-Ramírez examines the roots of the concept of "gender ideology," a framework that sees as profoundly flawed foundational concepts in feminism and LGBTQIA+ mobilizations of the late 20th century such as the social construction of gender and sexuality and the role of gender hierarchies as forms of oppression. The author then connects this to what she refers to as re-feudalization, a process by which inequality is reinforced and maintained by empowered non-state actors. This process elevates religious groups and ideas in social and economic debates and empowers private charities over the state in providing basic social support. All of this has implications for the future of politics in the region as it is realized in the policies of politicians such as Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele.

In "El Salvador's State of Exception," Sonja Wolf shows the importance of public safety and how its manipulation by elites can facilitate the rolling back of democracy. Examining Nayib Bukele and the roots of his political movement, the author shows the important role that insecurity and populist responses to insecurity can play in undermining democracy and developing support for a right-wing government. For Wolf, Bukele's gang-related state of emergency/exception is a key component of his effort to build and maintain power in El Salvador, with an eye to the general elections in February 2024. Bukele's government has used fear and its own performative responses to that fear to generate support and limit the

political space of potential critics in the media, academia and the political opposition. Wolf highlights the many resonances between the Salvadoran experience under Bukele and that of other new far-right regimes in the region. She notes in particular the ways that popular fatigue with the inefficacy of established parties, in the case of El Salvador's ARENA and FMLN parties fueled the spectacular rise and endurance of Nayib Bukele, in ways that resonate with Rovira's essay.

Camila Rocha and Esther Solano take up the matter of the far right at the heights of Brazilian politics in their essay, "*A ascensão de Jair Bolsonaro e as classes populares.*" They note that Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 with support from the working and middle classes, even though he is a far-right ideologue allied with business interests who rejected the idea of redressing inequalities. This was not because the working and middle classes did not understand their interests, they argue, but rather because of how class interests have changed in the 21st century, marked by the rise of digital communication and where new epistemic communities have emerged within society that have changed how populations mobilize. For Rocha and Solano, while social inequality is understood as a problem among Brazil's popular classes, it is not seen as a collective problem but rather one based on individual choices and failures. In an environment where out-of-touch elites are portrayed as pushing the country against the interests of workers, during the economic crisis of the 2010s, economic failure became conflated with moral failures. Bolsonaro, with his dictatorship-era nostalgia and a social media-based movement, became the reactionary solution to these moral failures in which the struggling middle class could stop blaming themselves for their economic plight and instead reproach empowered elites.

In his essay, "*Marielle Franco, Militias, Jogo do Bicho, and the Bolsonaros: State-Embedded Organized Crime and the Far Right in Brazil,*" Damian Platt examines Brazil's political system from the perspective of Rio de Janeiro's criminal history. Here he connects Jair Bolsonaro's political

roots to how during the military dictatorship (1964-85), former members of Brazil's armed forces participated in the *Jogo do Bicho*, the illegal lottery racket in Rio in which numbers are associated with animals (*bichos*). Former military officials developed strong connections with the underworld, enabling the emergence of protection rackets connected to security forces known today as *milícias* that control various legal and illegal markets. These groups have supported various political leaders in Rio including Bolsonaro and other members of his family. Platt shows how the contemporary far right is grounded in the legacies of the right-wing history of Brazil in its contemporary post-dictatorship politics. Thinking about how the contemporary new right is lodged within these violent histories is a critical element of understanding and studying this phenomenon.

We still have much to learn about the extreme right in Latin America. What is the relationship between economic elites and the far right? In many instances, arguments about the fraudulent nature of elections are central to the far-right's bid to win or hold onto power, as we saw in the January 6th insurrection in the United States, in Peru's elections in 2021, when Keiko Fujimori and her allies mobilized lawyers from powerful firms to the countryside to help "prove" that Pedro Castillo had been elected fraudulently, to Bolsonaro's dismal January 6th repetition, and Alejandro Giammattei's effort to alter the overwhelming electoral victory of Bernardo Arévalo in the August 2023 run-off elections in Guatemala. How are the tactics of the far right altering, challenging, and in some cases undermining democratic rule? How is the rise of the far right affecting the rights of the most vulnerable populations in the region? We hope this dossier and the discussions to follow at the LASA2024 Congress in Bogotá will contribute to these debates and to centering attention on the need for further research on the extreme right in the Americas.

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