

Argentina's far-right frontrunner reopens wounds of dictatorship

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📍Ricardo Coquet stands outside the former Escuela Mecánica de la Armada building, which served as a torture and death camp during Argentina's 1976-83 dictatorship. Photograph: Anabela Gilardone/The Guardian

Javier Milei has provoked alarm and outrage by downplaying the number of victims of the country's 1976-83 military rule

A sign outside the subterranean torture chamber welcomed victims to "The Avenue of Happiness".

A gramophone played a rock song on loop to muffle their screams: (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction by the Rolling Stones.

“It wasn’t a horror film, it was real-life horror,” said Ricardo Coquet, 70, one of about 5,000 prisoners held at the Buenos Aires death camp during Argentina’s 1976 to 1983 dictatorship – and one of the few to make it out alive.

Tears filled Coquet’s eyes and his voice cracked as he remembered seeing a young mother marched down to the secret jail’s basement in her nightgown to be drugged and thrown from a plane, just hours after giving birth.

“She was only 20,” he stuttered as he toured the deactivated Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Esma) prison, today a memorial museum that was recently declared a Unesco world heritage site.

The horrors described by Coquet occurred more than four decades ago during an almost unfathomably cruel period of military rule that saw an estimated 30,000 regime opponents killed or disappeared – the vast majority unarmed civilians.

More than 1,000 of the military commanders and officials behind the bloodshed have been tried and sentenced in ongoing trials as part of an internationally celebrated truth and justice process designed to prevent such crimes against humanity from ever happening again.



📷 The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo demonstrate outside the Casa Rosada presidential palace, as they have done every Thursday since 1977. Photograph: Anabela Gilardone/The Guardian

But in recent months excruciating memories of the dictatorship’s “Process of National Reorganization” have been dragged to the surface once more ahead of one of Argentina’s most important presidential elections since democracy returned in December 1983.

Israel-Hamas war live: lack of water in Gaza 'a healthcrisis on the brink of explosion', says charity

The far-right frontrunner, Javier Milei, has made questioning the decades-long consensus over the nature of Argentina's dictatorship and the number of victims a key plank of his campaign, to the outrage of those who suffered under the regime.

"We value the idea of memory, truth and justice – so let's start with the truth. There weren't 30,000 [victims], there were 8,753," Milei claimed during a recent debate, infuriating victims' families and survivors.

"It is utterly loathsome – an eternal insult to the memory of our children," said Taty Almeida, a founder of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo campaign group whose son, Alejandro, was abducted by a rightwing death squad and never seen again.

Liliana Furió, a film-maker and campaigner whose intelligence chief father received a life sentence for involvement in at least 20 disappearances, voiced perplexity that the "irrefutable truth" about such crimes was being undercut. "We want to cry out loud," Furió said. "This is like a nightmare, this can't be happening to us."

The estimate of 30,000 is based on the fact that Argentina's dictatorship had already killed some 22,000 people in the first two years of its seven-year rule, according to a 1978 tally intelligence officers provided to Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile.

"Since the disappearances are known to have continued for several more years, the actual total of those disappeared by the military should be extrapolated beyond the 22,000 who had already been killed at the time the report was written in July 1978," said the US-based National Security Archive which published that tally in 2006.

Coquet voiced disgust that an anti-establishment backlash over inflation and Argentina's atrophying economy meant Milei was close to becoming president. "It's a tremendous blow," Coquet said, denouncing how the populist Milei painted the systematic murder of dissenters as the result of a justifiable war against leftist terrorists.



📷 A view of photos of the victims who were thrown alive into the sea by the Argentine military dictatorship. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

“Their objective was to eliminate us,” Coquet said, bristling with anger as he stood outside interrogation room 13, where some of the worst torture sessions were conducted to the sound of the Rolling Stones.

Milei, a volatile and eccentric hard-right libertarian, is often likened to Brazil’s former president Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right former paratrooper who celebrated the military dictatorship in his country that caused hundreds of deaths and disappearances between 1964 and 1985. But unlike Bolsonaro, Milei is not a military man. Instead, his decision to downplay the dictatorship’s crimes seems to stem from his alliance with his vice-presidential running mate, the ultra-conservative congresswoman Victoria Villarruel.

Villarruel, who is expected to become defense, security and justice minister if Milei wins Sunday’s election, found fame defending military officials accused of human rights abuses during the dictatorship. Her father participated in anti-guerrilla operations during the dictatorship and her intelligence officer uncle worked in a clandestine prison. Villarruel has publicly attacked groups such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

Milei’s digital communications chief, Fernando Cerimedo, parroted his leader’s questioning of the regime’s 30,000 victims, claiming, contrary to evidence, there was “no historical record” of so many deaths.

However, Cerimedo hinted that Milei's decision to exploit the issue was largely about differentiating himself from rivals. "Perhaps saying this is a way of saying: 'I'm going to tell you the truth, even if you don't like it,'" Cerimedo said, denying Milei's movement defended Argentina's dictatorship.

"Chile's right is Pinochetista ... [But] here nobody's Videlista," Cerimedo said, in reference to the Argentinian dictator Jorge Rafael Videla, who was jailed for life for torture and murder and died behind bars in 2013. "We all reject him."

Not everyone, it seems. One Sunday in early October, employees of a progressive college on the outskirts of Buenos Aires arrived to find their building had been attacked by rightwing vandals. Among the phrases daubed on to its facade was: "*Videla volvé*" – Videla come back.



📍 Liliana Sallefranque: 'I just felt utter terror.' Photograph: Anabela Gilardone/The Guardian

"I just felt utter terror," said Liliana Sallefranque, a 55-year-old who works at the college which is named after the leftist Brazilian politician Marielle Franco, a Bolsonaro critic who was assassinated in 2018.

Sallefranque saw a clear link between Milei's radical rhetoric and the attack on her school. The culprits have not been caught but activists from Milei's party, Libertad Avanza (Freedom Advances), were canvassing nearby the day before, Sallefranque noted.

Marta Gordillo, who also works at the college, said she didn't believe all of Milei's many young followers supported or understood the pain Videla had inflicted on Argentina. "I think they're really disenchanted with politics, really pissed off, and attracted by Milei's angry

extreme-right discourse,” she said.

But both women feared Milei’s election would embolden extremists who did champion such ideas and legitimize hate speech, as Bolsonaro did in Brazil.

With polls putting Milei ahead of his rivals, activists of all ages are mobilizing to denounce the threat they believe he poses to Argentina’s young democracy.

On a recent afternoon Taty Almeida, 93, arrived at the University of Buenos Aires’s law school to address an assembly of anxious students. “We’re living through such difficult moments but we must not lose hope, OK guys? The last thing one loses is hope,” she told them.

In front of Almeida was a banner that read: “They are 30,000.” To her left was a memorial plaque naming the students the university lost during the dictatorship. Nearly all were in their early 20s. Their playful nicknames – Crazy, Bionics, Cool Dude, Clever Clogs – contrasted with the savagery of their fate.



📷 A sign saying ‘They were and are 30,000’ is held up at a demonstration by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires this month. Photograph: Anabela Gilardone/The Guardian

Almeida castigated Villarruel’s defense of regime officials and remembered how the vice-presidential candidate had visited prisoners convicted of genocide in jail, including Videla. “And let’s not talk about the other one, the one who talks to his dogs,” she said of Milei, who reputedly gets political advice from his mastiffs.

Almeida had a message for the students as they confronted the prospect a Milei-Villarruel presidency. “The only fight you lose is the fight you abandon,” she said.

The next afternoon, hundreds of campaigners gathered outside the Casa Rosada presidential palace – as they have done every Thursday since 1977 – to remember the dictatorship’s victims and follow Almeida’s advice.

“He represents violence and backwardness,” one anti-Milei protester, a 24-year-old trainee teacher called Constanza Escobar, said as she stood outside the palace where he may soon reside.

Escobar carried a poster featuring a lyric from a dictatorship-era anthem by the rocker Charly García that captured Argentina’s uncertain present. “Light the candles,” it said, “because the warlocks are thinking of coming back.”

Additional reporting by Facundo Iglesia
