



Javier Milei's Argentina: What Lies Beneath His View on Higher Education?

Marcelo Rabossi

Marked by rampant inflation that in 2023 alone soared to 211.4 percent, along with a poverty threshold set at 40.1 percent, Argentines sought radical change. Thus, it could be argued that Javier Milei's advent to the Argentine presidency, as an economist who gained notoriety in mass media by offering unorthodox advice to end inflation and poverty in the country, could be an act of frustration after decades of economic stagnation and impoverishment rather than a decision based solely on conviction and rationality.

Political Weakness and Aimless Thinking in Education

In 2021, Javier Milei founded "La Libertad Avanza" (LLA, translated as "Freedom Advances"), a coalition of small political parties aligned with libertarianism. Two years later, he became Argentina's new president. This skyrocketed rise is marked by a certain weakness, since LLA is a minority in both legislative chambers, forcing them to continuously negotiate with the opposition. Regarding education, Milei took office without any leading experts in the area at his side. Consequently, during the first month of his administration, technical teams whose members were not necessarily aligned with Milei's far-right libertarianism started to be formed. This could suggest the turn education could take during his tenure.

Milei and the Clash with Reality

During his presidential campaign, Javier Milei was in favor of financing education through a voucher system. However, it is ironic that his own secretary of education had questioned such a source of funding, even before his appointment. Another peculiarity of the presidential campaign refers to the introduction of fees at national universities. In short, this meant axing free access to undergraduate education. Argentina has 67 public universities, attended by almost 2.2 million students (80 percent of the total in the system). National universities charged tuition for undergraduate education only during relatively short periods of time. The first period was from 1980 to 1983, during the military dictatorship in Argentina. The second was from 1995 to 2015, during the Menem administration and the Kirchners' three administrations, when each university was given the choice to decide independently. Since 1949, Argentina has granted free access to undergraduate education. Such a decision was reaffirmed by the end of 2015, with the amendment of an article in the higher education law enacted in 1995. It is worth mentioning that between 1995 and 2015, very few universities chose to charge tuition fees, which evidences a cultural resentment toward higher education privatization.

Abstract

The arrival of Javier Milei, an admirer of libertarian theorists such as Murray Rothbard or Friedrich Hayek, to the presidency of Argentina raises endless questions. For example, whether his almost exclusively economic free-market views will be able to provide answers to the current educational crisis, with four out of 10 university entrants dropping out during the first year. Likewise, will his privatizing vision affect the public financing of the scientific system and national universities?

Another change that would indirectly affect higher education is crystalized in the notion of implementing high school exit exams.

Although president Milei later made clear that the policy of tuition fees would not be enforced in the short term, a bill introduced to congress proposes charging nonresident foreign students. At the time of writing this article, it is still uncertain whether such a bill would pass in both chambers. Still, universities could refuse to comply with it due to their status as autonomous entities. National universities usually rebel, which shows the power struggle between the state and higher education institutions.

Another change that would indirectly affect higher education is crystalized in the notion of implementing high school exit exams. Since 1983, with only a few exceptions, admission to national universities has been free and does not require any sort of entry examinations, although many institutions require mandatory remedial courses during the first year. There has been a public discussion about the necessity of such exams for university admissions. The current negotiations in congress with the opposition have made clear that it will not be the case, and that admission will remain free.

Argentina Unquestionably Calls for Change to Get Development Goals Back on Track

Although Milei insists that the ever-increasing state intervention in the people's economic and private affairs is what accounts for the country's impoverishment, such a view is rather simplistic. The underlying issue is not the size of the state but rather whether the government has sufficient funding resources to finance itself, and if the funds available are properly and efficiently allocated to ensure the provision of public goods like justice, health, and education, when the markets fail to provide appropriate answers. Reality for Argentina proves otherwise. Spending more than what it gets through taxation, Argentina needs constant financing for its deficits by printing money, which causes inflation. Also, the creation of 23 national universities over a 16-year period (2007–2023), many of them without any strategic logic and based solely on political reasons, reveals that irrationality prevailed for a long time.

Massive Budget Cuts and Threat to the Public University System

With the aim of reducing the fiscal deficit by means of a shock strategy, during the first two months the new government implemented a policy of unprecedented cuts to public expenditure. In fact, according to the data from the budget office of the national congress, state transfers to national universities only during January 2024 suffered a real drop of 16.5 percent. Likewise, there has been a reduction in the offer of scholarships for students. This has led some universities to declare that if the current reduction of funds continues, they will only be able to remain open for no more than four months. Moreover, some have begun to reduce the number of students admitted. Such is the case of the National Universities of Quilmes, General Sarmiento, and Hurlingham, for example. This blunt budget cut to the public university system has led to a general strike of teachers during mid-March 2024, caused by a nearly 50 percent plummet in their real salaries from December 2023 to March 2024.

Along the same lines, the current government's commitment to reduce public spending at all costs is demonstrated by the suspension of the opening of five new national universities declared by an act of congress in September 2023. According to the government, the objective will be to determine whether all the administrative procedures were duly observed. The fact remains that many institutions created during the last 15 years are seen as a response to political rather than real needs.

Conclusions

On one hand, it is a positive sign that president Milei has welcomed concrete proposals to discuss and ponder Argentina's future, and the role of universities in a new development agenda. On the other hand, his obsession with reducing public spending without considering the needs of the most vulnerable inhabitants could fan the flames of social conflict. Likewise, further reduction of the already meager funds allocated to research and development—Argentina only invests 0.6 percent of its GDP—means putting the country's future development at risk, although it is true that there is a need to rationalize spending based on a strategic view of money allocation. In any case, it is to be expected that a serious and dialogue-oriented opposition in congress on the one

hand, and the society with its conservative views on the public role and relevance of education on the other hand, would keep the new government from leading the country toward extreme radicalization, oblivious of the social role of the state. ▲

Marcelo Rabossi is a full-time professor at the School of Government, Area of Education, at the Torcuato Di Tella University, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
E-mail: mrabossi@utdt.edu.