



## Argentine medics raise alarm after Milei election

Argentina's new president has campaigned on an agenda of privatisation and charges for health care. Amy Booth reports.

Argentine doctors, scientists, and abortion activists have vowed to protect the country's public health-care and research institutions and defend reproductive rights after far-right economist Javier Milei was elected President on Nov 19, as leader of the La Libertad Avanza coalition. A political newcomer, Milei holds a conservative agenda that includes a shift towards paid health care, putting abortion rights to referendum, and downgrading the Ministry of Health of Argentina to a secretariat. "We see it as an attack on public health", said Guillermo Pacagnini, board member and International Secretary of the Trade Union Association of Health Professionals of the Province of Buenos Aires (CICOP, by its Spanish initials). "There will be more defunding of the health budget and moves towards privatisation."

Milei's proposals include charging fees for health care and creating a universal health insurance "proportional to the service recipient's capacity to pay". His campaign platform also proposed to regulate documentation of foreigners who practice health care in Argentina, adding that foreign residents will be required to pay for health care if they can afford to do so. Milei also plans to make the Ministry of Health into a secretariat within a proposed Ministry of Human Capital. It would probably continue to perform the functions of a ministry, but would be smaller with less funding, according to Pacagnini. "We understand it as a political signal", he said, adding that he expects it to function "more as an agency to regulate the business of health than a state organisation to plan according to needs".

Argentina's National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free

Abortion said in a statement that Milei and his Vice President-elect Victoria Villarruel "have threatened to intervene in our rights and repeal the laws achieved", and called on feminists, reproductive rights activists, and other groups to resist any potential attacks on sex education, sexual health, contraceptives, and abortion access. Milei has promised to hold a referendum on whether elective abortion should remain legal. Argentina legalised abortion procedures in pregnancies of up to 14 weeks gestation in December, 2020. At the time, it was the largest country in Latin America to allow the procedure on request.

Overtaking Argentina's abortion law via congressional debate would require a vote in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. However, La Libertad Avanza is well short of the necessary majority in both houses: it will have just 38 of 257 Deputies and seven of 72 Senators. Milei would not legally be allowed to overturn the abortion law via presidential decree, either. "I'm not saying that he can't try, but overturning a law of public order, I think that's very difficult", said Nina Brugo, a lawyer who co-founded the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion.

Both Milei and Villarruel have said that they would attempt to overturn the 2006 Comprehensive Sex Education law (ESI by its Spanish initials), which requires children to be taught about social and emotional aspects of sex and gender. Here, they would face the same obstacles as with the abortion law. "The ESI law is about informing people of their human rights", Brugo said. "[Villarruel] considers that ESI indoctrinates. But ESI teaches us to accept people as they are."

Argentine researchers have also sounded the alarm over Milei's comments about CONICET, Argentina's National Scientific and Technical Research Council. In August, Milei said during a TV interview that "CONICET's productivity is pretty questionable", and added: "CONICET as it exists today has to be closed."

In the countdown to the elections, the directors of 16 scientific and technical centres within CONICET published a statement rejecting Milei's stances. "We hold that science is the motor of development and the foundation of national sovereignty. Scientific development defends and expands rights[...]contributing to social mobility and progress without denying climate change", they wrote. Milei has called climate change a "socialist lie". In an interview with Argentina's Radio Mitre on Nov 25, Daniel Salamone, a veterinarian whom Milei has tipped to lead CONICET under his government, denied that it would be shut down, although he repeated Milei's claims that the organisation was unproductive.

Milei's victory has come amid an intensifying economic crisis in Argentina. Inflation is running at 144% and over 40% of the population is living in poverty. The situation has put pressure on the entire health system, according to Pacagnini. Dollar scarcity makes it harder to import some materials, and more and more doctors work multiple jobs. "The scapegoat is the worker" he said. "They get paid late and paid little."

Milei's inauguration will take place on Dec 10. On that date, his Cabinet will be formally sworn in, and the direction of Argentina's health policy over the next 4 years will start to become clearer.

Amy Booth

For the statement published by CONICET see <https://cordoba.conicet.gov.ar/comunicado-de-los-directores-y-directoras-de-los-16-centros-cientifico-tecnologicos/>