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Background

Stretching 2,300 miles from its subtropical north to its sub-Antarctic south, Argentina is the second largest country in South America and the eighth largest in the world, with an area of approximately 1.1 million square miles. Argentina is bordered on the south and west by Chile, on the north by Bolivia and Paraguay, and on the northeast by Brazil and Uruguay. The South Atlantic Ocean stretches down Argentina's east coast.

Argentina ranks as the thirtieth largest economy in the world¹ and is one of the most economically developed countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The country is characterized by a life expectancy of 75 years, low infant mortality, and high literacy rates, engendered by one of the highest rates of access to primary and secondary education in the region.² Ninety-seven percent of the population over the age of 15 is able to read and write.³

The Spanish colonized Argentina, establishing a permanent colony named Buenos Aires in 1580 and later creating the Viceroyalty of Rio de la Plata in 1776. As the Spanish started acquiring and farming more and more land on the Pampas, or plains, outside Buenos Aires, it sparked a series of confrontations with the indigenous populations. Many indigenous people were forced to abandon their tribes to work at the farms as *gauchos*, as the cattle raised on the lands

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acquired by settlers displaced most of the animals hunted by the natives. Others resisted this foreign encroachment by stealing cattle from the Spanish-owned land, and attacking settlements. The tensions between the Spanish settlers and the indigenous population shaped Argentina's ideas on race and led in following years to a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the indigenous tribes

The new landed elite, who had gained power through the growth of the cattle industry, wanted to be free of the imperial prohibition of all trade with countries other than Spain. In May of 1810 the elites seized the opportunity created by Napoleon's imminent takeover of Spain to unseat the Spanish-appointed viceroy. The country embarked on a long war of independence led by Argentine forces under the command of Generals Manuel Belgrano and José de San Martín against the forces of the Spanish Crown. Argentina concluded its struggle with Spain in 1818, resulting in total emancipation from Spanish rule.

In 1875, in response to escalating attacks on colonial interests, the Minister of War Alfonso Alsina fortified settlements and dug a major trench that extended almost 250 miles along the vast frontier that separated the territory of the federal government from those of the Mapuche Indians. The aim of the trench was to create a disincentive to invade Argentine territory as it effectively hindered the theft of cattle. This largely defensive strategy changed after Alsina's death. Starting in 1878, the new war minister, Julio Argentino Roca, began a campaign to kill, subdue, or expel the indigenous population from the land. In stating his case for the clearing the Pampas of its indigenous inhabitants Roca argued that:

Our self respect as a virile people obliges us to put down as soon as possible, by reason or by force, this handful of savages who destroy our wealth and prevent us from definitively occupying, in the name of law, progress and our own security the richest and most fertile lands of the Republic.⁴

In only a year the resulting military campaign erased native people from the national memory, both literally and figuratively, in sharp contrast to other centers of the former

Spanish Empire such as Mexico and Peru, which share an ideology casting Amerindians as paradigmatic symbols of national identity. According to this ideology, indigenous populations are recognized as distinct groups that contributed to the hybrid, mestizo nature of Mexican and Peruvian culture.⁵ Argentina's historical discourse, on the other hand, asserts a solely European origin.⁶

Perhaps because of this history, Argentina has long suffered an identity crisis of sorts, as it has struggled to place itself on the right side of value-laden binaries such as tradition and modernity, barbarism and civilization, progress and regress, Latin and European, and Peronist and anti-Peronist.⁷ Early Argentine views of race in general associated whiteness with progress⁸ and southern European cultures as intellectually and culturally inferior to their northern counterparts. In the years after independence, "Argentine governments...advocated immigration from northern European countries because they believed that such an infusion would bring 'healthy' traits to the population and thereby rid Argentina of its inferior Latin, Indian, and African racial character".⁹ The legacy of European racial stratification and Argentina's clear regional superiority in economic progress has led to a chauvinism that is somewhat abrasive to the country's neighbors.¹⁰ This chauvinism is the butt of a common joke among other Latin Americans that Argentines are typically "Indians who speak Italian and think they are English."¹¹

At the same time, however, most Argentines throughout their history have been aware of their southern European ancestry and inferior economic status compared with major industrial powers.¹² Moreover, the rush of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon immigrants the Argentine elites desperately desired in order to create a higher European rather than "Latin" character never materialized. On the contrary, early Argentine immigration policies mostly succeeded in bringing people of Spanish and Italian origin. Spanish immigrants played a pivotal role in preserving the Hispanic heritage of the country, assuaging fears of cultural loss among Argentina's criollo elite (refers to descendants of Spanish born in Argentina).¹³ This history explains why

throughout the twentieth century Argentina has had closer diplomatic ties with Spain than any other Latin American country.¹⁴

After independence Argentina entered a relatively stable period characterized by majoritarian rule, though the majority of Argentines were politically disenfranchised. The country adopted its constitution in 1853, which spurred the creation of a federal and presidential system of government with a bicameral congress. When universal male suffrage was established in 1912 it resulted in single party dominance, which lasted until 1930, when a military coup toppled the government and set up an authoritarian regime. This coup was the beginning of a pattern where electoral losers turned to the military as a way of obtaining power—or excluding their rivals from it.¹⁵

Between 1930 and 1983, fourteen military presidents took control of Argentina, repeatedly staging coup d'états and disrupting both the judiciary and the legislature. When institutions were seen as hindrances to those in power, they were ignored, modified, or cynically manipulated. In the absence of stable institutions elites were encouraged to behave in shortsighted and socially irresponsible ways, resulting in cycles of political instability and economic collapse.¹⁶ For example, since the 1940s elites have repeatedly violated the constitutionally guaranteed lifetime tenure of Supreme Court Justices and undermined the independence of the judiciary by seeking to remove justices unfriendly to their interests and replacing them with allies.¹⁷

A ubiquitous figure in Argentine politics was Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, who first came to power in 1946 after a massive working class mobilization started by his wife Eva "Evita" Perón.¹⁸ This mobilization was the beginning of the Peronist movement and caused an enduring polarization of Argentina along ideological lines between Peronist and anti-Peronist camps—left-wing populists versus right-wing elitists. Perón was exiled in 1955 and anti-Peronist elites opted to ban the movement and its political party, the Partido Justicialista. However, the Peronists survived as an underground movement through the labor movement, preventing other parties from building sufficient electoral support.¹⁹ The elites could not afford to lift the ban on Peronism, as the almost certain Peronist victory that would ensue was anathema to them. But the exclusion of Peronism proved equally destabilizing.

By the early 1970s this persistent instability, along with the emergence of violent urban guerrilla movements and paramilitary groups, caused Argentina to descend into chaos. Neither Perón's return to power in 1973 nor the accession of his third wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón, to power in 1974 after his death could stop the violence

from escalating. The cycle culminated in 1976 in yet another coup, one that heralded a period of unmitigated political repression by the military called the Dirty War.

The war was an extraordinary response to two extraordinary revolutionary guerilla groups: the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP)* and the *Montoneros*. Utilizing methods of torture, terror, kidnappings, and assassinations, the objective of the military was to eradicate those deemed to be subversive elements within Argentine society. This meant, in addition to the eradication of armed guerrilla groups, the dismantling of organized labor, the Peronist party, and the economic policies it supported.²⁰ The result of these aims was the creation of a climate of terror that engulfed not only those with direct links to the guerillas and their associates, but also universities, schools, newspapers, civil society organizations, and workplaces with even a hint of union activity. In short, state terrorism affected virtually every member of Argentine society. According to official estimates the death squads "disappeared" more than 13,000 people; however, human rights groups have claimed that the actual number of *Desaparecidos* (the disappeared) is more than double the official figures.²¹

The Argentine military was given support early on in its endeavor by the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In a June 1976 meeting with the Argentine Foreign Minister, Admiral Cesar Augusto Guzzetti, Kissinger told Guzzetti: "If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly. But you should get back quickly to normal procedures."²²

Presumably Kissinger urged haste because he knew that the U.S. Congress would likely cut military aid to Argentina due to its vast human rights abuses.²³ Beginning in January 1977 the Carter administration, with its focus on human rights, criticized and sanctioned the Argentine junta in the hope that such measures would push the junta to improve. On the contrary, this strategy led to a fractious bilateral relationship with the junta. The Reagan administration sought to improve relations by embracing the junta with open arms, but changed strategy when Argentina invaded the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982.²⁴

That invasion led to a disastrous conflict with the British and the 1983 collapse of the military government. The collapse was also spurred along by Argentina's severe economic woes, which undermined support for the junta and energized the resistance that had been building up since the 1976 coup. The collapse of military rule was followed by a period of robust democracy that has survived until the present day, despite economic disaster in 2001 "that led to violent public protests and the resignation of several interim presidents."²⁵

Current State of Coexistence

Like countries such as the U.S. or Australia, Argentina is made up of diverse peoples, both indigenous and immigrants. The overwhelming majority (97%) of the Argentine population (around 40 million people) are whites of European descent,²⁶ giving it an ethnic make up rather distinct from other countries in the region. Most citizens are of Spanish or Italian descent. There are, however, significant populations of Argentines of Arab, British, German, Eastern-European, and Scandinavian descent, as well as a relatively small number of Asian and Afro-Argentines (descendants of people brought over as slaves). Argentine censuses do not record ethnicity; however Afro-Argentine scholar Miriam Gomes estimates a current Afro-Argentine population of 500,000 to 800,000 people.²⁷ As it is difficult to classify someone with mixed and multiple ancestries, the figures need to be viewed with caution. As yet, no collective rights are extended to Afro-Latinos in Argentina.²⁸ In a special census, the population with indigenous heritage was estimated to be around 600,000.²⁹ The largest groups are the Mapuche, Kolla, and Toba tribes, with over 100,000, 70,000, and 69,000 people, respectively, self-identifying as belonging to these groups. Poverty rates are higher than average in areas with large indigenous populations. Indigenous people have greater than average rates of illiteracy, chronic disease, and unemployment.³⁰

Newer immigrant groups, mainly from neighboring Latin American countries, have joined these populations in recent decades. Due to the fact that Argentina's cultural discourse excludes those who do not fit into the idea of Argentina as an enclave of Europeans, newer non-European immigrant groups, especially Bolivians, occupy the lower rungs of the Argentine ethnic hierarchy. Due to their skin color and indigenous phenotype, Bolivians have been subjected to verbal abuse and increased scrutiny by the police.³¹ In 2007 the Bolivian justice minister Celima Torrico reported that she overheard an Argentine immigration official say, "How could this Indian be a diplomat?" when she presented her credentials upon her arrival at the airport.³²

As is the case with most diverse countries, a plethora of languages are spoken in Argentina. Though reliable numbers are difficult to obtain, there are large numbers of Italian, Spanish, German, and Arabic speakers, and smaller communities of Hebrew, Japanese, Welsh, Chinese, and Korean speakers,³³ as well as the many languages of the indigenous peoples. Spanish is the most widely spoken language in Argentina, and is the country's only official language. Due to the legacy of European immigration there

are several regional dialects that reflect varying degrees of Italian and Spanish influence.

There is also religious diversity, with groups of Protestants, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Evangelical Christians. The vast majority of Argentines (76%) define themselves as Catholic.³⁴ Though the constitution calls for support of the Roman Catholic religion, it also guarantees religious freedom and does not state that Roman Catholicism is the official religion.³⁵ Argentina has the largest Jewish community in South America and the fifth largest in the world. As one of the most conspicuous groups in Argentina's economic and political circles they have been one of the groups most disproportionately affected by political and economic turmoil.³⁶ While during the early Peronist era there was a good deal of baiting and discrimination against Jews, that has ebbed to some degree. Still, anti-Semitism remains a significant problem in Argentina. Data gathered for the year 2006 by the Delegation of Argentine Israelite Associations (DAIA) showed a total of 25 reported verbal or physical threats against Jews, and 392 reported incidents of anti-Semitic propaganda. These statistics represented a 35 percent increase in anti-Semitic acts from the previous year.³⁷ The most recent data, from 2007, shows a decrease in such incidents, which has been attributed to an absence of sustained conflict in or with Israel during that year.³⁸

Racism and class hatred increased significantly after the collapse of the military regime in 1983.³⁹ During the 1990s Argentina experienced growing social problems stemming from the consolidation of the neoliberal economic model, which led to a boom in unemployment rates, and growing social fragmentation. High unemployment was blamed on undocumented workers and economic migrants, who were accused of stealing Argentine jobs, driving down wages, and causing the majority of criminal offenses. As one commentator observed about this era, "Jokes, comments, aggression, and discrimination are often directed at the more recent immigrants from neighboring countries and overseas. This racism is also expressed in notions that the *Chilotes* (Chileans) and *Boliguayos* (Bolivian-Paraguayan) are lazy, backward, thieving people who have come to steal jobs from Argentines."⁴⁰ Several unions carried out campaigns demanding that laws should be passed to stop immigrant groups from neighboring countries coming to Argentina or at the very least to restrict their employment.⁴¹ These sentiments did not appear to subside until the economic recovery in 2002, when competition for jobs with immigrants from Argentina's more "Latin" neighbors became less intense.⁴²

Policies and Initiatives

Immigration

Argentina has celebrated Immigrant's Day on September 4th since 1949, and many towns and cities throughout Argentina have celebrations of ethnic diversity along with memorials and monuments dedicated to immigration. Efforts to combat the invisibility of Afro-Argentines are being undertaken by civil society groups. Due to the lobbying of Afro-Argentine activists, like Maria Magdalena de la Madrid of the community organization Fundación Africa Vive, a monument was dedicated to the Afro-Argentine soldiers of the nineteenth century. The Argentine Library of Congress currently runs a Web site that explores the history of race and slavery in Argentina and Uruguay.⁴³

Argentina implemented a new immigration law in 2004, which protects migrants' rights to basic health care and education regardless of migration status and states that the right to migrate is essential and inalienable. The Argentine government seems to recognize that scapegoating of immigrants from neighboring countries has occurred and reports that it is taking steps to protect immigrants through its National Anti-Discrimination Plan (explained in more depth below).⁴⁴

Argentina also implemented the *Patria Grande* program in 2006, allowing illegal immigrants to have their migration status regularized in order to afford them better protection from exploitation. The law, which is aimed at citizens of the countries party to the MERCOSUR regional trade agreement (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) was promulgated in response to public outrage after a fire at a Buenos Aires sweat shop exposed the widespread exploitation of undocumented immigrants as cheap labor.⁴⁵ The program is being piloted in Buenos Aires and to date 33,011 people in the region of the capital have used the program to obtain legal residency in Argentina. The government hopes to expand the program to the rest of the country.⁴⁶

Racism

In 1968, Argentina ratified and added to its constitution an international convention against all forms of racism and discrimination. In 1995 Argentina established the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI), charged with implementing the National Anti-Discrimination Plan, a strategy developed with the consultation of affected groups in order to meet their needs, while incorporating the objectives of the first Durban anti-racism conference. INADI receives and investigates complaints, and has organized a forum to monitor the

media for information that could promote xenophobia, discrimination, or acts of violence. INADI also conducts education programs—including proactive measures to prevent discrimination, such as police and teacher training—and supports victims of discrimination. However, in recent years INADI's budget has been cut substantially, making it much more difficult for the organization to carry out its work.⁴⁷

Religion

Though Argentina is a Catholic nation, freedom of religion is guaranteed in the constitution and by several laws. In 1994 the constitution was reformed and language resulting in religious discrimination was removed. For example, the president and vice-president are no longer required to be Catholic or swear "before God, our Lord, and these Holy Gospels."⁴⁸ The Federal Education Act was implemented to ensure that religious diversity is taught in schools; however, the level of acceptance of religious diversity is higher in some Argentine provinces than others. Such initiatives are further complicated by the appearance of state preference for the Catholic religion manifested in activities such as the provision of subsidies solely for Catholic institutions.⁴⁹

Human Rights

Implementation of human rights laws began only after the 1983 rebirth of democratic institutions, when Argentine jurisprudence shifted to accept the primacy of international law. The Argentine government formed the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, due in no small part to pressure from civil society, to establish facts of disappearances during the 1976-83 period of military rule and gather evidence of the ideological repression of Argentine civilians.⁵⁰ The research of the investigation commission was presented in the *Nunca Mas* (Never Again) report. Several pieces of legislation were enacted allowing the prosecution of those responsible for human rights abuses and providing compensation to victims of the junta, despite resistance from some in the political sphere and the military, which felt unfairly maligned. That resistance led to laws in 1986 and 1987 that prevented further prosecutions for crimes against humanity. But in 2005 the Argentine Supreme Court declared those laws unconstitutional, allowing cases against those alleged to be responsible for abuses to be reopened. Many Argentines are angered by what they perceive to be a lack of accountability, evidenced by the "loss" of crucial evidence in a number of trials, and the escape of alleged torturers with compliance by the police. This is compounded by the continued disdain shown to victims by the ex-military and conservative circles in the government. Survivors of imprisonment and torture are often viewed with suspicion, based on the view that they

must have sold out in order to avoid being killed.⁵¹

The first Perón administration granted indigenous groups recognition as Argentine citizens in 1947 and began campaigns in several parts of the country to give them documentation. However, the majority of Amerindians remained without documentation until the late sixties.⁵² In December 1983 Argentina ratified U.N agreements on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.⁵³ Argentina has also ratified convention 169 of the ILO (International Labour Organisation) on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.⁵⁴ The Law for the Protection and Support of Indigenous Communities was implemented in 1989, calling for acknowledgment of the need to grant land titles and give legal recognition to indigenous communities. This law also created an autonomous institution to deal with indigenous issues, the Institute of Indigenous Affairs (INAI), as part of the Ministry of Health and Social Security.⁵⁵

The constitution also recognizes the ethnic and cultural identities of indigenous people and calls for the protection of their rights to the communal ownership of their ancestral lands, and participation in the management of the natural resources therein. But this participation has been hard to put into practice, in part because responsibility for implementing the law is delegated to Argentina's provincial governments, which must amend their own constitutions for the laws to take effect. So far, of the 23 provinces, only 11 have constitutions recognizing indigenous rights. Advocacy groups such as the Church World Service, the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) and the Center for Human Rights and Environment (CEDHA) have been helping indigenous communities exercise their rights and win titles to their ancestral lands.

Argentina is a member of the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. In January 2007 the government co-sponsored a U.S.-drafted U.N. resolution that condemns, unreservedly, denials of the Holocaust and urges all member states to do the same.⁵⁶

Education

The rights of indigenous people to bilingual education are guaranteed by the constitution however Argentina has not as yet passed all of the laws necessary to implement those rights effectively, and there have been allegations pertaining to discrimination and inadequate training of indigenous teachers as well as insufficient inclusion of the histories of indigenous peoples in school curricula.⁵⁷

Gender

The National Council on Women (CNM) was created by the Argentine government on the basis of the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 1994 Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women.⁵⁸ The council works to mainstream gender-sensitive perspectives in government policy, and carries out programs aimed at promoting equal opportunities for women such as the National Women, Equity and Work Program. The aim of that program is to develop the capacity and self-esteem of Argentine women to improve their position in the work place.⁵⁹ The CNM is not part of the cabinet, however, which limits its role in the governmental structure.

The Argentine government has created the Tripartite Commission on Equal Opportunity for Men and Women in the Workplace, consisting of the CNM, the Special Representative for International Women's Issues, the Ministry of Labor, and union and business organizations. The mandate of the commission is to promote equality for men and women in the job market. The commission created an Office of Labor Violence Counseling in order to provide assistance to victims of gender-based violence, including psychological, moral, or sexual abuse in the workplace.⁶⁰ In order to redress economic inequalities engendered by the disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic and care work that women undertake, the pension system has been reformed to allow people who haven't contributed through salaries to receive state benefits after retirement.⁶¹

In 1991, Argentina passed the "Quota Act," which required that a minimum of 30% of the candidates in all elective positions in Parliament must be women.⁶² Currently, 42% of the Argentine Senate and 34% of the House of Deputies are women. Other government bodies and initiatives to eliminate violence against women and girls are the Secretary of Human Rights, the National Prosecutor's Office of Assistance to the Victim, and the Ministry of the Interior's Program against Violence.

Abortion is illegal in Argentina, except in cases where the pregnancy is the result of the rape of a mentally ill or mentally disabled woman, or where it's a danger to the life or health of the mother. Argentina's National Program on Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation is aimed at providing women with access to affordable and equal access to information, advice, and contraceptive methods, including emergency contraception. Argentine women, especially the poor, still face significant barriers that prevent them from availing themselves of reproductive health services⁶³ Women with unwanted pregnancies are forced to backroom clinics or to perform abortions on themselves. As a result, close to one third of maternal

deaths are due to complications from abortion procedures.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Though the Dirty War remains an open wound in Argentine society, the fact that efforts are being made to tackle the past is encouraging. Argentina has come a long way from the human rights abuses and weak institutions of the past and now exhibits promise in several respects. Argentina's new laws and institutions are a welcome step in the right direction and are helping the country celebrate and protect its diversity. However, these initiatives do not appear to have undermined the dominant view of Argentina as a white, racially homogenous European enclave amidst Latin American neighbors. While views of a common identity are generally positive in a country with people of diverse origins, such discourse in the Argentine case facilitates a view of non-European immigrant groups as foreign elements and perpetuates the exclusion of indigenous peoples and Argentines of African descent. That this discourse has been recognized and made explicit in the research conducted under the National Anti-Discrimination Plan is an important development. Work on transforming this exclusionary discourse and affirming the contributions and value of Argentines of African and indigenous descent should continue. Of some concern, however, is the fact that some of the institutions responsible for eradicating discrimination (notably INADI and CNM) have already been subjected to severe cutbacks. The Argentine government must make every endeavor to provide these important institutions with adequate funding.

It is also important that Argentina redouble efforts to break down barriers preventing women from exercising their reproductive rights. While abortion is criminalized, the authorities must ensure access to safe abortion services for women whose procedures would be exempt from punishment. The authorities must also ensure that accurate information about contraceptive methods is available and make sure that women are able to make decisions about which methods to use without undue interference. To this end the health ministry should publicly censure health service personnel who withhold or provide inaccurate information. Furthermore, the government could go further to protect Argentine women from spousal abuse, for example increasing the number of women's shelters and making the completion of treatment for perpetrators of domestic violence compulsory.

Further efforts must be made to secure the rights of Argentina's indigenous peoples. While the Argentine government's efforts in this regard are laudable, it is

imperative that all provinces revise their constitutions in order to guarantee that all of Argentina's indigenous people are able to exercise control over their ancestral lands and preserve their culture should they wish to do so.

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Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

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Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

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