



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Argentina's first time flirting with seductive anti- establishment politics



Long-haired senator from Argentina, Javier Milei, whose sideburns resembled the late-stage Elvis Presley, yelled "Out!" as he frantically tore off a board bearing the names of government ministries and flung them one by one on the ground.

This was but a small portion of Mr Milei's presidential campaign, in which he sought to demonstrate graphically to the electorate that he desired a smaller governmental apparatus, including the abolition of a dozen ministries.

Among those are the ministries of culture, ecology, education, health, science and innovation, work and social services, and transport.

And he succeeded. Contrary to all expectations, perhaps surprising even himself, Javier Milei won the leading position in last Sunday's primary elections, leaving behind candidates from the established conservatives and the currently ruling Peronist coalition.

The economist, who calls himself an anarcho-capitalist, won with about 31% in the general rehearsal before the October 22 elections. Even though mandatory for the majority of Argentines, voting in the primaries does not produce any decision. It is significant because it paints a clear picture of the result of the forthcoming presidential elections.

Mr Milei was an outsider until last Sunday evening, with polls giving him up to 20% support, leaving two front seats for the mainstream – the ruling Peronists and the conservative coalition Together for Change.

His populist performance, anti-system programme and unconventional rhetoric helped him gain a leadership position before the general elections in November.

"A different Argentina is impossible with the same old things that have always failed", said Mr Milei after announcing the results.

Does Milei want to be taken seriously?

At that point, he changed from a candidate who had won protest votes to a candidate who would be required to put his ideas into action by the will of a third of the electorate. Did Mr Milei genuinely wish to fill this position?

This proponent of abolishing the central bank and adopting the US dollar as the national currency is not a pioneer in the large gallery of populists throughout the world, offering a recipe for economic recovery with easy solutions; simple slogans instead of elaborate policies.

But Argentina has not had such an experience so far. Peronist governments and centre-left presidents have ruled most of the last 75 years, including during 15 of the previous 20 years.

Trump as a role model

Javier Milei's result marks Argentina's first breakaway from the mainstream political framework into the uncharted territory of (right-wing) populism or anti-establishment candidates.

Argentina's political scene has always been stable, which has always set it apart from the rest of Latin America, even though its economy has frequently fluctuated as being traditionally unstable. It no longer exhibits this feature.

Javier Milei enjoys being compared to Donald Trump, whose loud and aggressive behaviour he frequently emulates.

He loves using social media and other digital platforms to promote his opinions, similar to Trump, which is consistent with their policies on working "for the common people" and against the rigid establishment.

Numerous surveys with Argentines who are happy they chose Mr Milei demonstrate, on the one hand, their profound dissatisfaction with the country's long-established political elites and, on the other, their willingness to give almost anyone a chance, even if they have reservations about whether his plans will come

to pass.

Savings that can crush the impoverished

Mr Milei's plans for the future of Argentina are radical. In addition to the abolition of a large part of government departments and the central bank, he also advocates the abolition of public education, the charging of public health services, and the privatisation of state-owned companies.

His principal objectives are savings, reducing inflation, which has reached 116%, escaping poverty, which affects roughly 40% of the population, and paying off the country's debt, which the IMF estimates to be worth more than \$40 billion.

But it appears that Mr Milei has discovered the majority of votes among poorer Argentines, the unemployed, and inhabitants of large suburbs, among losers and their resentment of the political and governmental establishment.

If Javier Milei is able to put the new policies into effect, these people will be the first casualties. That is nearly unanimously acknowledged based on past electoral victories by populist and anti-system candidates.

As a rule, their easy solutions then hit the wall of the complexity of the problem, which, however, could not be solved by sweet promises about the abolition of ministries or by distributing money that does not exist.

"If reforms are not carried out cautiously, you could have enormous social upheaval. There is a lot of discomfort among investors about Milei. The reality is that markets don't like uncertainty", Benjamin Gedan of the Wilson Centre told The Wall Street Journal.

Was Milei enough of a warning?

According to surveys, Argentina's president

will not be elected on October 22 but in a second round in October, as none of the candidates are expected to immediately cross the 45% or 40% threshold with the requirement that they win more than 10% than the runner-up.

Currently, Mr Milei and the candidate of the conservative coalition, Patricia Bullrich, a former minister of security, one of the few government agencies Milei does not wish to dismantle, are considered the best prospects to compete in the second round.

Until then, the biggest opponent to Mr Milei and his prospects of becoming the new head of state will be himself and his political platform.

In the recent primaries, Argentines voted emotionally, more than rationally, on whether Milei's populism would really improve their lives.

They voted for his unusual political promotion (for Argentina), sharp language and radical shifts, more than the expectations that such a policy could provide results.

This is further demonstrated by projections that his Liberty Advances party would have a meagre, nearly inconsequential strength in the parliament, with roughly 10% in each of the two houses, even if he is elected president.

Since the general rehearsal does not count, voters might "get serious" and support candidates with less risky plans for the future before the October elections, particularly until the second round.

There is a firm belief that Milei's threat of severe political and economic measures was sufficient to serve as a warning to change the current policy that has put the country in a hugely difficult economic and social position.