

Peron and Peronism¹

Early life and career of Peron

Perón in his career was in many ways typical of the upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class youth of Argentina. He entered military school at 16 and made somewhat better than average progress through the officer ranks. A strongly built six-foot-tall youth, Perón became the champion fencer of the army and a fine skier and boxer. He served in Chile as a military attaché and travelled to Italy to observe the rise of the Fascists and Nazis during 1938–40. He had a bent for history and political philosophy and published in those fields.

In 1943, after participating in a successful military coup, Perón became Argentina's minister of labour, a position through which he enacted various social measures to help the country's growing class of urban industrial workers. Gaining the admiration of the masses, Perón called for the state to take a leading role in the economy to ensure cooperation between businesses and labour. In 1946 he was elected to the presidency with the strong support of the workers and their labour unions; he also gained the support of many lower-middle-class citizens and of the country's industrialists. After Perón was overthrown and exiled in 1955 by the military, the leaderless Peronist movement was weakened by factional conflicts, since it was composed of many divergent elements, from left-wing trade unionists to right-wing authoritarian nationalists. Nonetheless, the movement remained the main civilian contender for power in Argentina.

Marriage to Eva Duarte

In early October 1945, Perón was ousted from his positions by a coup of rival army and navy officers. But associates in the labour unions rallied the workers of greater Buenos Aires, and Perón was released from custody on Oct. 17, 1945. That night, from the balcony of the presidential palace, he addressed 300,000 people, and his address was broadcast to the country on radio. He promised to lead the people to victory in the pending presidential election and to build with them a strong and just nation. A few days later he married actress Eva Duarte, or Evita, as she became popularly called, who would help him rule Argentina in the years ahead.

After a campaign marked by repression of the liberal opposition by the federal police and by strong-arm squads, Perón was elected president in February 1946 with 56 percent of the popular vote.

Perón set Argentina on a course of industrialization and state intervention in the economy, calculated to provide greater economic and social benefits for the working class. He also adopted a strong anti-United States and anti-British position, preaching the virtues of his so-called justicialismo (“social justice”) and “Third Position,” an authoritarian and populist system between communism and capitalism.

¹ This article has been taken from two Encyclopedia Britannica articles, “Peron, Juan” and “Peronist.”

If Perón did not structurally revolutionize Argentina, he did reshape the country, bringing needed benefits to industrial workers in the form of wage increases and fringe benefits. He nationalized the railroads and other utilities and financed public works on a large scale. The funds for those costly innovations—and for the graft that early began to corrode his regime—came from the foreign exchange accumulated by Argentine exports during World War II and from the profits of the state agency that set the prices for agricultural products. Perón dictated the political life of the country by his command of the armed forces. He severely restricted and in some areas eliminated constitutional liberties, and in 1949 he arranged a convention to write a new constitution that would permit his reelection.

Perón in exile

Re-elected leader of the Justicialist Party (Partido Justicialista) by a somewhat larger margin in 1951, Perón modified some of his policies. But he was overthrown and fled to Paraguay on Sept. 19, 1955, after an army-navy revolt led by democratically inspired officers who reflected growing popular discontent with inflation, corruption, demagoguery, and oppression.

Perón finally settled in Madrid. There in 1961 he married for the third time (his first wife had died of cancer, as had Evita in 1952); his new wife was the former María Estela (called Isabel) Martínez, an Argentine dancer.

In election after election the Peronists emerged as a large, indigestible mass in the Argentine body politic. Neither the civilian nor the military regimes that precariously ruled in Argentina after 1955 were able to solve the relatively rich country's condition of "dynamic stagnation," in part because they refused to give political office to the Peronists.

The military regime of Gen. Alejandro Lanusse, which took power in March 1971, proclaimed its intention to restore constitutional democracy by the end of 1973 and allowed the reestablishment of political parties, including the Peronist party. Upon invitation from the military government, Perón returned to Argentina for a short time in November 1972. In the elections of March 1973, Peronist candidates captured the presidency and majorities in the legislature, and, in June, Perón was welcomed back to Argentina with wild excitement. In October, in a special election, he was elected president and, at his insistence, his wife—whom the Argentines disliked and resented—became vice president.

A legacy of turmoil

While in exile Perón had wooed the left-wing Peronists and had supported the most belligerent labour unions. Once returned to power, however, he formed close links with the armed forces and other previously opposition right-wing groups. When he died in 1974, he left to his widow and successor as president an untenable situation. Isabel Perón failed to obtain the firm support of any power group, not even the labour unions. Deep dissension between right-wing and left-wing Peronists erupted into terrorism and violence after Perón's death in 1974. Terrorist activity and

political violence increased. On March 24, 1976, the armed forces took power, removed Isabel Perón from office, and set up a military junta.

Peronists have retained the Presidency for most of the time until the present. By 2003 factional fighting within the Peronist party led to a split. Menem sought to regain the presidency in the April 2003 presidential election; however, because neither Menem nor the other Peronist candidates could gather enough support within the party, President Duhalde cancelled primary elections and authorized each Peronist candidate to run under the name of his own faction. It was the first time that the party had more than one official candidate in a presidential race. Menem thus ran against two other Peronist candidates as well as candidates from other parties. In the first round of voting, Menem led with one-fourth of the vote, finishing slightly ahead of Peronist candidate Néstor Kirchner, but failed to surpass the threshold necessary to win. Under pressure from many of his supporters, who realized that he had little chance of defeating Kirchner, Menem withdrew prior to the runoff, and Kirchner was elected by default.

Latin American populism²

“Populism” is a slippery, elusive concept. But it is central to understanding what is happening in the region. One of its many difficulties is that it is often used as a term of abuse. In many parts of the world, “populist” is loosely used to describe a politician who seeks popularity through means disparaged as appealing to the baser instincts of voters.

It is in Latin America where populism has had the greatest and most enduring influence. As in Russia and the United States, it began as an attempt to ameliorate the social dislocations caused by capitalism. In Latin America it became an urban movement. Its heyday was from the 1920s to the 1960s, as industrialization and the growth of cities got under way in the region. It was the means by which the urban masses—the middle and working classes—were brought into the political system.

In Europe, that job was done by social-democratic parties. In Latin America, where trade unions were weaker, it was accomplished by the classic populist leaders. They included Getulio Vargas, who ruled Brazil in various guises in 1930-45 and 1950-54; Juan Perón in Argentina (pictured above) and his second wife, Eva Duarte; and Victor Paz Estenssoro, the leader of Bolivia's national revolution of 1952. They differed from socialists or conservatives in forging multi-class alliances.

Give me a balcony

Typically, their leadership was charismatic. They were great orators or, if you prefer, demagogues (“Give me a balcony and I will become president,” said José Maria Velasco, Ecuador's most prominent populist, who was five times elected president and four times overthrown by the army). Like Huey Long, Vargas and Perón used the new instrument of radio to reach the masses. Mr Chávez's “Bolivarian revolution” relies heavily on his skills as a communicator, exercised every Sunday in his four-hour television programme.

The populist leaders sought a direct bond with their mass following. They led personal movements rather than well-organised parties. Argentina's dominant political organisation bears Perón's name. Take Mr Chávez out of the “Bolivarian revolution” and there would be nothing left. Contrast that with President of Chile Michelle Bachelet, who presides over a stable four-party coalition, or Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil from 2003 to 2011, whose Workers' Party has up to 800,000 dues-paying members.

The populists saw elections as the route to power, and pushed successfully to expand the franchise. But they also relied on mass mobilization—on getting their followers out into the streets. They were often less than democratic in their exercise of power: they blurred the distinction between leader, party, government and state. Perón, for example, packed the judiciary,

² This article has been taken from an *Economist* article dated 12 April 2006, *The Return of Populism*.

put his own people in charge of trade unions, and rigged his re-election in 1950. Mr Chávez used a constituent assembly to gain control of all the institutions of state. Both Mr Morales and Mr Humala have promised similar assemblies.

Not coincidentally, many of the populists have been military officers. That goes for Vargas, Perón and Lázaro Cardenas, Mexico's president from 1934 to 1940, who nationalized foreign oil companies and handed land to peasants. Mr Chávez and Mr Humala are retired lieutenant-colonels. Part of their appeal is that of the military *caudillo*, or strongman, who promises to deliver justice for the “people” by firm measures against the “exploiters”. Some scholars distinguish between military populists and civilians such as Haya de la Torre and Paz Estenssoro, whom they see as “national revolutionaries” closer to social democracy.

But there are many common threads. One is nationalism. The populists championed national culture against foreign influences. They harked back to forgotten figures from their country's past. In many respects, they were nation-builders.

While their preaching was often anti-capitalist, they made deals with some capitalists. They rallied their followers against two rhetorical enemies: the “oligarchy” of rural landlords and foreign “imperialists”. They supported industry and a bigger role for the state in the economy, and they granted social benefits to workers. They often paid for this by printing money.

Such policies were pursued not just by populists of the past, but by Mr García, Peru's president in 1985-90. In a milder form, they are being followed by Mr Kirchner, Argentina's Peronist president. Mr Chávez has been rescued from deficit financing only by Venezuela's oil windfall.

Populist economics was adopted, too, by Salvador Allende, Chile's Socialist president of 1970-73, and Nicaragua's Sandinistas. That has led many observers to use “populist” and “leftist” interchangeably—a mistake that led foreign investors to lose money when they panicked unduly when Lula won Brazil's election in 2002.

More Mussolini than Marx

In fact, there is nothing inherently left-wing about populism. Some populist leaders were closer to fascism: Perón lived as an exile in Franco's Spain for 18 years. Many favoured corporatism—the organisation of society by functional groups, rather than the individual rights and pluralism of liberal democracy.

Other writers have seen populism as a technique of political leadership more than an ideology. They have applied the term to such free-market conservatives as Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Argentina's Carlos Menem who, in different ways, sidestepped interest-groups and made direct

appeals to the masses. It is not clear whether Mr Humala, if elected in a run-off, would fall into this category—or try to mimic Mr Chávez.

Populism is full of contradictions. It is above all anti-elitist, but creates new elites. It claims to favour ordinary people against oligarchs. But as Messrs Dornbusch and Edwards pointed out, “at the end of every populist experiment real wages are lower than they were at the beginning.” Populism brought mass politics to Latin America, but its relationship to democracy is ambivalent. Populists crusade against corruption, but often engender more.

In the 1960s, populism seemed to fade away in Latin America, squeezed by Marxism, Christian democracy and military dictatorship. Its current revival shows that it is deeply rooted in the region's political culture. But it also involves some new elements. The new crop of populist leaders rely partly on the politics of ethnic identity: Mr Chávez and Mr Humala are both mestizos. Their coalitions are based on the poor, both urban and rural, and those labouring in the informal economy. They champion those discomfited by globalization rather than industrialization.

One big reason for populism's persistence is the extreme inequality in the region. That reduces the appeal of incremental reform and increases that of messianic leaders who promise a new world. Yet populism has done little to reduce income inequality.

A second driver of populism has been Latin America's wealth of natural resources. Many Latin Americans believe that their countries are rich, whereas in truth they are not. Populists blame poverty on corruption, on a grasping oligarchy or, nowadays, on multinational oil or mining companies. That often plays well at the ballot box. But it is a misdiagnosis. Countries develop through a mixture of the right policies and the right institutions. Whatever their past achievements, the populists are leading Latin America down a blind alley.