

Argentina: New government, new direction for dictatorship trials?

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Less than 48 hours after the presidential elections in Argentina – which gave victory to the right-wing conservative candidate Mauricio Macri – the newspaper *La Nación* was leading with the headline “no more vengeance”. It was a reference to the ongoing criminal trials seeking accountability for crimes committed during the Argentine military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. Over 30,000 people were murdered during this period, most of them “disappeared” in secret torture camps; many were never found. But now more than 600 former military and police officers and civilians including doctors, clergymen and judges have been convicted: Argentine society’s efforts to address past crimes, while late to get underway, eventually served as an example for the rest of the world. It was Nestor Kirchner’s government that overturned amnesty laws, paving the way for a wave of court proceedings against those responsible for dictatorship crimes. But this success would have been unimaginable without the decades of efforts by survivors, relatives and movement activists who all worked tirelessly to bring about justice for the victims of the military dictatorship. German activists and lawyers also supported and continue to support the Argentine human rights movement.

And so this week I teamed up with a friend, sociologist Rosario Figari Layús from Argentina, to present her new book “*Los juicios por sus protagonistas. Doce historias sobre los juicios de lesa humanidad en Argentina*” (The trials by their protagonists: twelve stories about the crimes against humanity trials in Argentina). The book, based on interviews with those involved in the proceedings, not only reveals personal stories but also shows the great significance of the trials for society in Argentina.

The conversations in the book show that the punishment of those responsible is not by any means the most important element of the trials. Carlos Soldati, whose brother was murdered and who himself was subjected to torture while detained, tells how important it was to him and his family that a court officially confirmed what the family had long reported about his brother’s murder.

Even in democratic Argentina, survivors and victims of the dictatorship still face stigmatization. Another survivor, Delia Barrera, explains how meeting her torturers in the courtroom brought about a reversal of roles: now she was a witness on the side of the accuser and her violent abusers were in handcuffs. The trials of the past ten years finally made it clear that the violent acts of the dictatorship were crimes against humanity.

There is no question about the role played during the period by state actors such as the military, police and secret service officials as well as politicians. Another important element of the truth about the dictatorship is that there was large scale collaboration between these state actors and private corporations: the aim was to neutralize the organized labor force. But to date efforts to address the complicity of corporations in the crimes have been slow. Following the election of the business-friendly Macri as president, many Argentine human rights activists fear that these proceedings could now come to an end.

And yet: the reaction of the Argentine public and the staff at *La Nación* gives grounds for hope. Workers at the paper publicly distanced themselves from the article which opposed the dictatorship trials. And the efforts of survivors, relatives and civil society to attain truth and

justice will not cease. They need solidarity and support from international civil society in order to continue writing the success story of Argentina's dictatorship trials.