



TRUMP HAS LONG PRAISED AUTOCRATS AND POPULISTS. HE'S NOW EMBRACING ARGENTINA'S NEW PRESIDENT - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on November 22, 2023 by NICHOLAS RICCARDI and JILL COLVIN | Associated

Press



Photo: Javier Milei, presidential candidate of the Liberty Advances coalition, speaks at his campaign headquarters after polls closed for general elections in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Donald Trump has long praised a particular type of foreign leader — men he describes as "tough" and "strong," even if they have chipped away at their countries' democratic norms.

The former president and GOP front-runner is now celebrating the newly elected leader of Argentina, Javier Milei, a wild-haired, chainsaw-wielding, self-described "anarcho-capitalist" dubbed "the madman" by his admirers.

"A very special congratulations to Javier Milei on a great race for president of Argentina," Trump exulted in a video posted Tuesday on his social media site that echoed an earlier statement. "I am very proud of you. You will turn your country around and truly Make Argentina Great Again!"

Milei's resounding win gives Trump a new potential ally if he wins the White House again — and underscores his enduring influence on global politics in the near-decade since he launched his first bid for the presidency. It's also the latest example of the potency of right-wing populism that flirts with authoritarianism, and an anti-incumbency fever that has spread across much of the world.

"It's just so much easier to be a populist than it used to be," said Steven Levitsky, a Harvard University political scientist and co-author of "How Democracies Die."

Levitsky cited several global trends that have reshaped both Argentine and U.S. politics. Among them: the repeat economic shocks the world has suffered since 2008, the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and the reach of social media.

Rising populism and anger at the perceived establishment could shape not just next year's U.S. presidential election, but votes across the world. The United Kingdom, Mexico, India, Pakistan and Taiwan are all expected to vote on new leaders in 2024.

"Voters want figures from recognizably outside the political establishment who basically want to punch the establishment," Levitsky said.

Milei often stoked comparisons to Trump during his campaign, praising him in an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson and promoting unproven theories about election fraud in his own race before he won. Many of Milei's supporters made "Make Argentina Great Again" hats and T-shirts a common sight during the campaign, echoing Trump's slogan.

He spoke of taking a chainsaw to government and abolishing Argentina's Central Bank and key ministries including those of health and education — just as Trump has proposed slashing government agencies criticized by some conservatives

His calls to purge the "political caste" from Argentina's government follow Trump's calls to "drain the swamp" and obliterate a "deep state" he claims is against him in Washington.

Milei won all but three of Argentina's 24 provinces, and his opponent conceded even before the electoral authority began announcing the preliminary results. But prior to winning the runoff election, he promoted unproven claims of irregularities in the election's first round, suggesting "that they put the result in doubt."

He also vowed in a radio interview Monday to privatize state-run media outlets that covered him negatively and which he deemed "a covert ministry of propaganda."

Trump continues to promote lies about the election he lost to President Joe Biden and has attacked media outlets he deems unfriendly as "enemies of the people."

"There is definitely a feeding off each other," said Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, the director for the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights organization. She said both men are products of the same economic and social forces.

Sánchez-Garzoli, who went to Argentina to observe the elections, described broad discontent with the political order across the region as liberal democracies fail to meet the basic needs of their populations. That is driving a sense of disillusionment and mass polarization, she said, especially among younger generations who have responded by saying, "Let's burn it down and go with something completely different."

"They feel that this person is different so somehow it has to be different," she said.

Beyond sharing policy goals, she said, Trump and Milei are also stylistically similar — both seen as celebrities who project a sense of machismo and thrive on "being as outlandish as possible, to keep ratings going."

"What Trump did was he broke the rules of how you talk about things," she said. "I think he made it OK to go after your opponents in a very no-holds-barred, no respect, exterminate them at any point way," which, she said, wasn't the kind of rhetoric "you saw to this level in Latin America before."

It's unclear if Trump and Milei might forge a friendship, as Trump did with another South American leader, Brazil's ex-president, Jair Bolsonaro, who was once labeled the "Trump of the Tropics."

Bolsonaro, who made visits to the U.S. as president and spent time at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida, also ran unabashedly pro-Trump campaign that emulated the former president's tone and style. He, too, made unsupported allegations of fraud after his loss last year, which culminated in an attack on the Brazilian Capitol eerily reminiscent of the Jan. 6, 2021, assault in the United States.

But while Trump is now the front-runner for the Republican nomination, Bolsonaro was barred from running for any political office until 2030 for abusing his power.

Trump's campaign did not respond to questions about whether he and Milei had spoken since Milei's victory or whether they intend to.

But Trump has long had an affinity and respect for authoritarian leaders and populist strongmen, explaining, at times, that "the tougher and meaner they are, the better I get along with them."



Among the leaders he's praised are Hungary's Viktor Orbán, China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

He has been particularly enamored of late by Orbán after an interview in which the Hungarian leader blasted the Biden administration and said the only path to ending the war in Ukraine would be Trump's reelection to the White House.

Speaking Saturday at an event in Fort Dodge, Iowa, Trump spent several minutes praising Orbán, saying he was "very honored" by the comments from a man he called "one of the strongest leaders."

"He's a very strong man, very strong, powerful man, and one of the most respected leaders in the world. Tough. No games, right? Hungary," Trump said of the country, which European Union lawmakers last year declared was no longer a democracy and had instead become "a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy" under the leadership of its nationalist government.

Trump also continued to praise Xi, describing him as "a man who looks like a piece of granite, right? He's strong like granite. He's strong."

"He's a fierce person. Now the press doesn't like it when I say good things about (him), but what can I say?" Trump went on. "He runs 1.4 billion people with an iron hand."

He has used similar language to describe Putin, drawing criticism from his rivals in the GOP primary.

Trump has long defended his use of such language, insisting his comments are statements of fact, not flattery.

"If I say a certain leader is smart that's controlling a big part of the world, the press gets upset that I say smart because that's a good thing. No no," he said. "These are very smart people."

Riccardi reported from Denver. Associated Press writer Daniel Politi in Buenos Aires, Argentina, contributed to this report.