

THE INFAMOUS DECADE

1932-1943

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The coup d'état of 6 September 1930 inaugurated an unprecedented and gloomy stage in Argentine history. It was the first time the armed forces disrupted constitutional order and closed parliamentary life, setting a precedent that would be a burden for decades. The overthrow of president Hipólito Yrigoyen was preceded by a strong economic and social crisis in the context of the Great Depression of 1929 and the fall in agricultural export prices, which were the basis of the national economy.

General José Félix Uriburu tried to establish a corporatist and nationalist regime, inspired by European models that were gaining momentum in those years, but his attempt to reform the Constitution failed. The lack of consensus, the resistance of social sectors and the very divisions within the army made it impossible to consolidate the plan. After two years of uncertainty, elections were held in 1932 and Agustín P. Justo took over as president. Although the Constitution had been formally reinstated, the voting mechanism was rigged. It was the first sign of a new political order: the beginning of what history would remember as the “Infamous Decade,” a time when institutions operated with apparent regularity, albeit corrupted by fraud and control of conservative elites.

The national Congress reopened that same year, but it did so under conditions that put its legitimacy into question. The ruling alliance, known as the Concordance, made up of conservatives, radical party members that opposed Yrigoyen and independent socialists, secured an artificial majority by tampering with electoral rolls, manipulating of polling stations, proscribing the Radical Party and resorting to the federal intervention of rebellious provinces. In this context, both houses were populated once again with top hats, a visible sign of an elite which had regained control of the debating chambers after decades of increased openness, which had begun in 1912. Despite this, the Congress was not merely decorative: fundamental laws were passed and crucial debates took place, reflecting the tensions in a country torn by the economic crisis.

The global depression forced Argentina to introduce significant changes in its economic model. Exports came under threat due to the fall in international demand, brought about by the shrinking of global trade and capital flows. Nations began to embrace tariff protectionism to defend their fragile and beaten down economies. In order to maintain the agricultural economy—the foundation of the system in place since the late 19th century—the State was required to take on a regulatory role that had previously been minimal. During this period, the Congress passed a law that

created the Argentine Central Bank and was aimed at structuring monetary and credit policies in a context of growing complexity. The National Grain Board and the National Meat Board were also established—interventionist agencies seeking to guarantee minimum prices and secure foreign markets. These innovations meant a decisive step towards building a more active State, capable of intervening in the economic life and attempting to mitigate the social effects of the crisis. The parliamentary debates regarding these measures revealed a constant tension between those who defended the need to adapt to a changing world and those who clung to the liberal tradition of the free market.

One of the most controversial milestones of this period was the signing and ratification of the Roca-Runciman Treaty in 1933, which established an agreement with Great Britain to guarantee the purchase of Argentine meat in exchange for significant economic and commercial concessions. The treaty was approved by Congress after intense debates that highlighted the country's structural dependence on the British power and the subordination of national decisions to the interests of large meatpacking foreign companies. For many people of the time, it was the clearest expression of the “surrender” of the national economy. The opposition denounced this treaty harshly but the ruling majority managed to impose it, evidencing that Parliament, even while functioning, was bound to the dictates of a conservative regime that prioritized foreign stability over economic sovereignty. The matter of meat trade marked the whole decade and was marred by episodes of corruption and violence. The investigations promoted by the parliamentary opposition uncovered scandals involving shady deals, bribery and influence peddling that implicated high-ranking officials. The dramatic climax was reached in 1935, when senator Enzo Bordabehere was assassinated in the Senate's debating chamber, while accompanying senator Lisandro de la Torre during an inquiry into irregularities on the meat trade. The crime, committed in full view during the debate, shocked the public and revealed the extent to which violence could break into the very heart of this representative institution.

At the same time, social issues had an increasingly prominent presence in the legislative agenda. Despite being limited and encountering strong resistance, laws were passed regulating working hours and broadening certain worker protections, borne of undeniable social pressure. Labor unions, inspired by socialist, communist and anarchist movements, intensified their demands during the 1930s and, even though state repression was a frequent response, there were also many attempts to partially channel those demands through institutional means. In that sense, the Congress reflected the contradictions of a regime that sought to keep its privileges

but was compelled to provide minimal responses to a society that was rapidly urbanizing and beginning to change its expectations.

In the international arena, Argentina's foreign policy was marked by firm neutrality and non-intervention. Law No. 12,260, which approved the Anti-War Treaty of Non-Aggression and Conciliation, promoted by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Saavedra Lamas, embodied this principle in legislation, reaffirming the diplomatic tradition aimed at keeping the country on the sidelines of international conflicts. This stance of neutrality, initiated by Argentina during World War I (1914-1918), would be maintained during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and at the outset of World War II (1939-1945), although it was not free from internal tensions and external pressures. Everyday life during the Infamous Decade was marked by contrasts. Economic recession, unemployment and poverty coexisted with cultural expressions that left a lasting mark on the national identity. Tango, in the voice of Carlos Gardel, immortalized the nostalgia and the sorrows of a society in turmoil, while writers such as Roberto Arlt portrayed the harshness of urban life and the disappointment at politics in his novels and chronicles, known as *aguafuertes*. Though discredited, the Congress remained a stage where these tensions were made visible: press reports of the time reported with irony on chamber debates, portraying a Parliament that functioned as an institution but that many citizens thought as having become a theater devoid of genuine representation.

By the end of the decade, the situation was becoming increasingly uncertain. The Concordance retained control, but social and political tensions were intensifying. Fraud and political proscription were eroding public trust in the system, while the military—who had seized power in 1930—remained watchful and ready to act. On 4 June 1943, a military uprising overthrew president Ramón Castillo, bringing the Infamous Decade to an end. An eleven-year period during which the Argentine Congress had held meetings, passed laws and discussed crucial issues under a regime that had distorted the very essence of representative democracy was finally closed.

The assessment of the Infamous Decade is complex. It was a time of political regression during which the Congress lost much of the legitimacy it had gained in the previous decades, and public will was systematically twisted. However, it was also a period of significant institutional transformation: economic agencies of state intervention were created, incipient labor laws were enacted and a foreign policy stance that would shape Argentine diplomacy well into the next century was maintained. The paradox was that, while the very foundations of democracy were undermined, the Argentine State was taking steps towards a modernization that

would lay the groundwork for later changes. By 1943, an infamous period was left behind together with a legacy of institutions and debates that would set the course of mid-20th-century Argentina.

The evolution of the electoral system in Argentina (1932-1943)

In 1930 began a period of institutional instability, which lasted for more than fifty years. After an interregnum with General Uriburu at the head of the Executive, the 1932 elections were held in which General Agustín P. Justo was elected president. In the middle of his term, and in view of the forthcoming presidential elections to be held in 1938, major reforms were made to electoral laws to ensure a succession that would respond to the same political process under way.

The testing ground was the province of Buenos Aires, the largest electoral district in the country. In this case, a mechanism was established whereby political parties' poll watchers had no authority, so the chairman of the polling station was entirely responsible. These authorities were designated by the government of the province, which meant that there was no minimum control of the opposition political forces. Due to the implementation of this system, the provincial ruling party managed to get favorable results in the 1935 elections, winning the governor office and obtaining an important victory in both legislative chambers.

The Radical Party returned to electoral abstention in 1931, which it had abandoned in 1911. It did so with the aim of combating fraud and opposing the rigged elections carried out by the regime that emerged from the 1930 coup. On this occasion, the electoral policy did not give the expected result, so in 1935 the Radical Party began to compete in provincial and then national elections. The first electoral test was in the province of Buenos Aires, where it did not get a good result, although it did succeed in the legislative elections of the Federal Capital, Córdoba, Santa Fe and Entre Ríos.

In view of this, the national government pushed for a reform of the electoral law to be applied in the presidential elections of 1937. Thus, in 1936, by law No. 12,298, the winner-take-all-system for the elections of presidential and vice presidential electors was re-established to try to secure the majority in the provinces with the largest populations; and, in this way, ensure the succession to the same political party. This crystallized in 1938 when the Ortiz-Castillo ticket won the elections.