

**FEUDAL ARGENTINA:  
How enduring provincial caudillos  
undermine democracy and the rule of law**

**FORMOSA - SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO - CHACO -  
CATAMARCA**

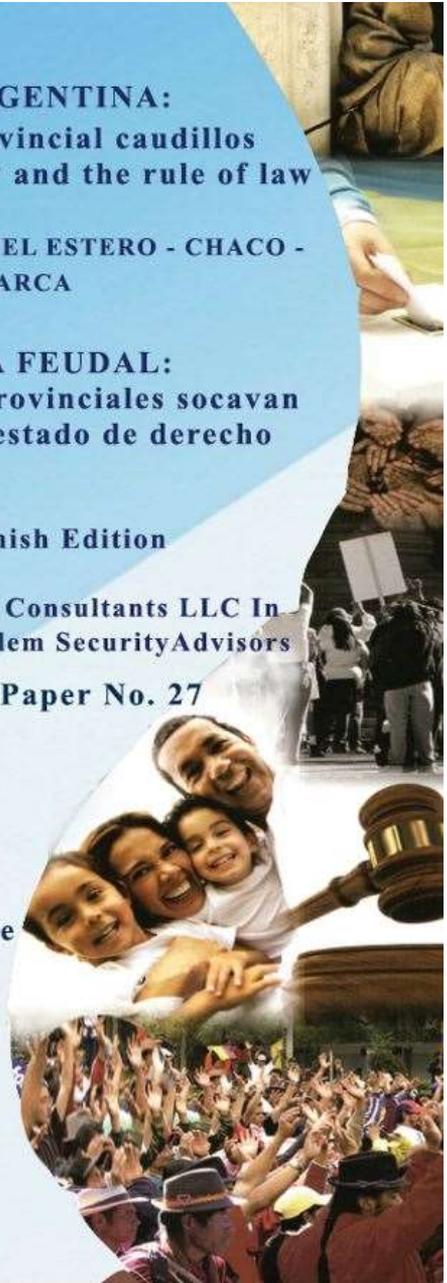
**ARGENTINA FEUDAL:  
Cómo los caudillos provinciales socavan  
la democracia y el estado de derecho**

**English - Spanish Edition**

**By Douglas Farah, IBI Consultants LLC In  
collaboration with Fidelem Security Advisors**

**The Democracy Paper No. 27**

**Interamerican Institute  
for Democracy  
2025**



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# Presentation

By Prof. Eduardo Gamarra

It is a special privilege to present this important and timely work by Douglas Farah, titled "Feudal States in Northern Argentina." Douglas is not only a distinguished investigative journalist whose groundbreaking research has profoundly shaped our understanding of transnational organized crime, corruption, and governance in Latin America, but he is also a lifelong friend and esteemed colleague. Our friendship, which originated from shared childhood experiences in Bolivia, has evolved over decades into a series of professional collaborations. Recently, I had the privilege of co-authoring a detailed analysis of transnational organized crime in the Dominican Republic with him and Pablo Zeballos.

The remarkable breadth of Douglas Farah's knowledge spans the entire hemisphere, greatly enriched by his extensive fieldwork, sharp analysis, and unmatched access in Central America, the Andean region, and the Southern Cone. His investigative rigor and analytical clarity are vividly demonstrated in this study, which provides an essential examination of governance structures in Northern Argentina. Specifically, Farah investigates how deeply entrenched authoritarian provincial governments have systematically consolidated their power, often intertwining with local and transnational criminal networks, thereby profoundly influencing Argentina's economic and political landscape.

This document provides a comprehensive analysis of four provinces—Formosa, Chaco, Santiago del Estero, and Catamarca—detailing the complex political, social, and economic dynamics underpinning local caudillo governance. Farah meticulously highlights how these provincial leaders leverage corruption, coercion, clientelism, and control over essential resources to maintain their dominance, often at the expense of transparency, democratic governance, and public welfare. The analysis also clearly illustrates how these regions have become central hubs within broader illicit economies, including cocaine trafficking, contraband smuggling, human trafficking, and other criminal activities.

Douglas Farah’s work not only sheds light on an understudied yet critically important area of governance but also exemplifies his exceptional ability to combine rigorous field research with broader geopolitical analysis. His findings emphasize the urgency for reforms and greater accountability within these provincial structures, providing valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and civil society advocates aiming to tackle challenges posed by corruption, organized crime, and authoritarian governance in Latin America.

Douglas Farah’s research remains indispensable for scholars, journalists, politicians, and anyone dedicated to understanding and effectively addressing the complex security and governance challenges that shape the political landscape of our hemisphere.

# Introduction

The Americas today face a growing series of challenges to democratic government and the rule of law. Across the hemisphere, rising authoritarianism and weak institutions combine to create a complex web of corruption, impunity and abuses of democratic norms. Researchers have studied these authoritarian trends at the national and regional levels. This collaborative study led by IBI Consultants, in collaboration with Fidelem Security Advisers, looks at these challenges at a subnational level in Argentina, where provincial autonomy predominates.

The analysis of the interlocking networks of autonomous and semi-autonomous provincial governments, found that *Caudillo* governors ruling the provinces as personal survive for decades due to transactional relations with the national government. Even when there are external shocks to the system, the system survives. We examine three consolidated *caudillo* models and one that is far less consolidated but strategically important. We hope this expands the understanding of the ongoing struggle to consolidate democracy and rule of law in the region.

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# Overview

The northern tier of Argentina, stretching from the eastern border with Paraguay, abutting Bolivia to the north and meeting Chile on the west, is a key region that will help define the nation's economic future. It encompasses large lithium deposits, gold mines, strategic minerals, rich cattle lands, forests and vital territory linking key continental riverine, land transportation routes and potentially part of interoceanic Pacific-Atlantic land routes now being studied.

With its multiple porous international borders and deeply authoritarian provincial governments that operate largely outside the reach of federal government and law enforcement, the region is also the growing hub of multiple, rapidly evolving illicit economies and supply chains that are helping to define the new criminal order in the hemisphere. The geographic space sits astride some of the continent's most important north-south riverine and land cocaine highways, as well as a key transit point for human trafficking, irregular migration, and billions of dollars in contraband cigarettes and electronics.

This study examines the *Caudillo* or strongman model of governance of four of those provinces or states: Formosa, Chaco, Santiago del Estero and Catamarca. All except Santiago del Estero share easily permeable international borders.



Figure 1: The Northern Tier provinces with "Feudal" Governments (IBI Consultants)

As will be discussed in detail, these provinces are among the leading recipients of federal subsidies in the country, and have been for decades. Nevertheless, all except Catamarca rank among the top five provinces in poverty rates, lack of social services and infant mortality.



Figure 2: Indicators of poverty and lack of infrastructure: Homes without running water (left) and homes without sewer service (right). (Source: CENSO 2022. Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos)

While each province is different, with unique idiosyncrasies and variants, they share many characteristics that have allowed powerful leaders of subnational territories to perpetuate themselves in power for decades, dominating the provinces’ political and economic spheres, often with ties to criminal organizations.

Each of the provinces are part of what Argentine academics have called “Feudal Argentina,” where a single person or family has ruled for more than a decade, rely on “extractive regimes” controlling state budgets and using the public funds to reward family and loyalist in clientelist states, and create a sharply uneven electoral playing field where the opposition has little chance of winning.<sup>1</sup>

These governors have collectively developed a common set of coercive, repressive and corrupt structures to retain control in areas that remain among the most remote in Argentina. In each province, homicide rates are close to the

relatively low national rate of Argentina, but other types of repression against political and civil society groups opposed to the government are used and are carefully targeted for maximum psychological effect.

These common structures include:

- Preservation of the appearance of democratic governance, primarily through tightly controlled and distorted electoral processes, as discussed, while controlling the levers of power across the government;
- Creation of provincial intelligence services and local police forces loyal to the government and deployed against political opponents;
- Control of subservient judicial authorities and control of the courts leading to impunity;
- Control of the local media by coercion and control of advertising revenues in a region where there is private enterprise or employment outside of state institutions. Paid advertisements and announcements (*pautas publicitarias*) from the provincial government make up the vast majority of media revenue, and outlets can and are silenced simply by withdrawing vital ad revenue.
- Economic control through the creation of tight-knit webs of alliances with the owners of provincial banks, construction contractors, and others who depend on state-controlled contracts, to gain a

stranglehold on the local economy through contract adjudication;

- Creation of a structure of deep dependence by the local population on the provincial government for jobs and access to health, education and retirement resources, which creates complex webs of economic control, corruption and clientelism.

These structures are strengthened by mutually beneficial and self-reinforcing political and economic transactional ties to patrons and structures in the central government. The federal-provincial corruption ties are transactional, waxing and waning depending on the victors of presidential elections, but are never severed. These interlocking political and economic interests have shielded the *caudillo* governors because of their extreme utility in delivering votes and control to the governing party.

As Sarah Chayes noted in her groundbreaking study of corruption of Honduras, and applicable to these case studies,

[C]orruption can no longer be understood as merely the iniquitous doings of individuals. Rather, it is the operating system of sophisticated networks that cross sectoral and national boundaries in their drive to maximize returns for their members. corruption is the operating system of sophisticated networks that link together public and private sectors and out-and-out criminals—including killers—and whose

main objective is maximizing returns for network members. Corruption is built into the functioning of such countries' institutions. And, like the criminal organizations that are threaded through their fabrics, the networks cross international boundaries. Exchanging favors and establishing beachheads with partners and service-providers around the globe, they might best be considered transnational kleptocratic networks.<sup>2</sup>

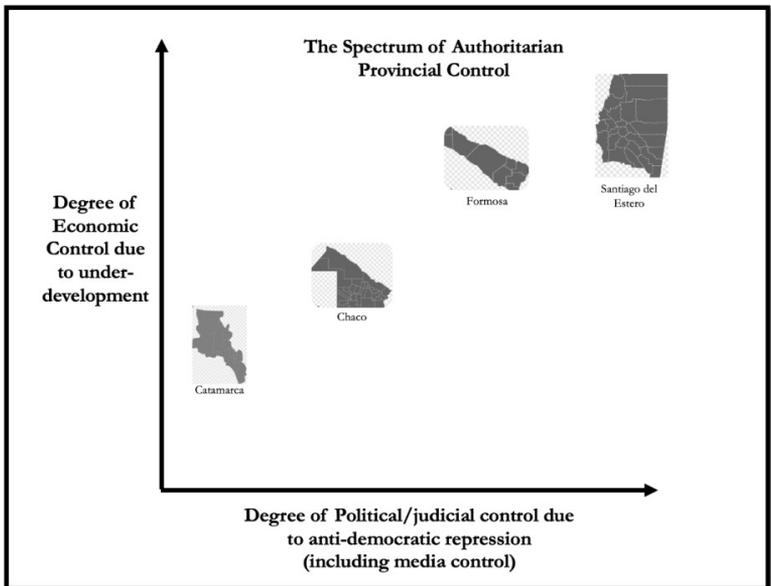


Figure3: Spectrum of Authoritarian Provincial control (IBI Consultants)

We based our findings on field visits to the provinces over the past two years, law enforcement and intelligence reports, analysis of national and provincial data (where available) interviews with Argentine and regional experts

and open-source literature reviews. This work also builds on 2023 fieldwork and study in the region focusing on the province of Santiago del Estero.<sup>3</sup>

## Feudal Argentina and the Fourth Wave of Transnational Organized Crime

While Argentine academics have written about the “feudal” governance of numerous provinces, the predatory, closed, interlocking governance structures that have shown a surprising durability and resilience over the past three decades, are now a key component of the “Fourth Wave” of transnational organized crime in Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the Fourth Wave analysis is that cocaine transit routes from producing countries (Bolivia and Perú in the case of Argentina) to Atlantic ports of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Uruguay, then onward to Europe is a growing and more lucrative route than traditional markets in the United States. These provinces are key parts of that supply chain.

The 2,100-mile Paraguay-Paraná waterway, with at least 150 ports, is a crucial transit route linking five countries – Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, and is now the “primary route for shipping record amounts of cocaine to Europe.” Cocaine seizures have increased fivefold from 2010-2021.<sup>5</sup> Among the planned or nascent interoceanic highways and railroads across the continent,

at least two would cross through this Northwest Argentina region, potentially bringing significant economic gains but also new routes of contraband and drug trafficking, avoiding transit through the Panama Canal or the Straits of Magellan.

Another key factor in the movement of cocaine is that, given an almost complete lack of air traffic control in Northern Argentina, these provinces are crisscrossed with clandestine airstrips, used by small aircraft from Bolivia, Paraguay or Brazil to offload quickly or drop from the aircraft when flying at low speed and altitude.<sup>6</sup>

Part of what defines the Fourth Wave is new illicit markets where new regional and extra regional criminal actors embed themselves in multiple illicit activities, from cocaine trafficking to cigarette smuggling to human trafficking to contraband electronics.

The new cocaine gateway to Europe, flowing through the porous borderlands with centuries of smuggling activities, has attracted a host of extra regional actors, from Balkan and Russian to Asian transnational organized criminal groups.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 4: The Paraguay-Paraná waterway, touching the provinces of Formosa and Chaco in Argentina, is a main source of cocaine trafficking and other illicit economies (Washington Post)*

These developments make more isolated regions like these provinces, with close proximity to porous international borders, weak integration into a nation's national life, and controlling key illicit pathways to ports and high-density population centers, among the most valuable in the hemisphere. The value increases when the regions already have highly centralized political and economic control structures that are largely free of national, institutional constraints and thrive on corruption and impunity.<sup>8</sup>

## Can the Model be Dismantled?

While little studied, understanding these subnational authoritarian models is key in deciphering how rule of law and democratic governance is undermined; how China successfully acquires access to vital resources like lithium while bypassing national standards and reporting norms; and how criminal networks thrive in protected environments, helping to dramatically reshape the face of global illicit economies.

When political outsider Javier Milei won the presidency of Argentina in November 2023 as a self-described anarcho-capitalist, the first priority on his radical populist agenda was the shrinking and dismantling a state apparatus most Argentines believed had grown unwieldy, inefficient and massively corrupt under successive governments. On the campaign trail he often used a chainsaw as a prop to demonstrate how he would cut the government down to size.

That meant immediately and radically slashing the funds that traditionally flowed from the national government to the provinces and vital to the economies of the four provinces studied, which he did through executive actions. Some analysts argue that, while cutting the budget may be necessary, it also has the potential to fortify and further criminalize some provincial governments that will be desperately seeking resources, while rendering the national government even less influential.

While the success of Milei's overall project has yet to be defined, he faces a challenge his predecessors have failed to successfully negotiate for more than three decades: The survival of a core of profoundly undemocratic regional political leaders who rule northern provinces as their personal fiefdoms, sitting at the intersection of drug trafficking, human trafficking and multiple illicit economies, and clinging to power through corruption, political persecution and economic control.

## The Model

Argentina, like most of Latin America, has a long history of *Caudillismo* and authoritarian military dominance at the national and provincial level, with figures like Juan Perón (1946-1955; 1973-1974) and his wife Evita<sup>9</sup>, and the brutal military juntas of the 1970s which ruled until the return to democracy in 1983.<sup>10</sup>

Because the provinces existed before the Argentine constitution formed a single nation state, the governors have unusually broad powers, meaning “almost every single important policy issue at the national level in the last two decades has been negotiated somehow by the President and his/her ministers (or operators) with provincial governors, who subsequently instruct national legislators from their provinces to go along.”<sup>11</sup>

In the most authoritarian provinces, there is virtually no separation of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches, meaning national law enforcement and intelligence services have almost no ability to operate in those provinces, because the loyalty of their counterparts is primarily to the governor. Leaks of operational security are so endemic that when federal operations are undertaken, they are usually launched from outside the actual target areas to minimize the risk being compromised.<sup>12</sup>

Under the Argentine legal structure, provincial powers include:

- Dictating their own constitutions (including electoral rules);
- Authority over vital areas of public policy (e.g., education, health), including charge of executing national public policies such as social welfare programs;<sup>13</sup> and
- Control of natural resources, not only above ground but underground, including strategic commodities such as lithium and rare earth minerals. Mineral sovereignty gives the provincial governors the ability to negotiate contracts for strategic commodities at the subnational rather than national level and reap significant and often opaque revenue streams.

Perhaps most importantly, Argentina’s provinces have policymaking authority complemented by the Constitution’s residual power clause. The clause ensures that provinces reserve all powers not delegated to the federal government. As heads of provincial executive branches, governors are the main political figures in the provinces.<sup>14</sup>

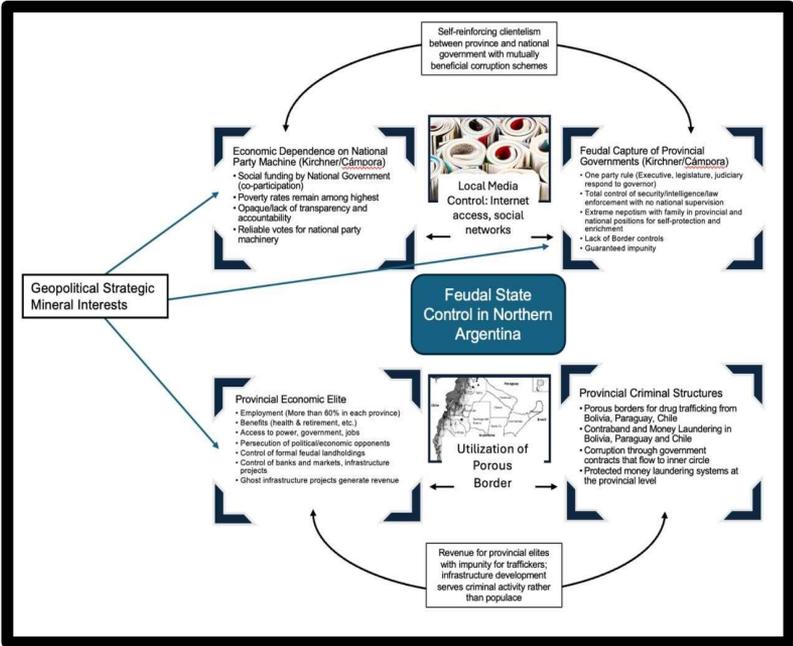


Figure 5: Interlocking networks of authoritarian provincial and national networks that empower feudal governance (IBI Consultants)

While the national constitution allows for the federal government to “intervene” or temporarily take over a provincial government in case of extreme deterioration of social order, the provision was applied only once in the past

century, in Santiago del Estero in 2004, due to “continuous violations of human rights, trampling on the rights of citizens of the Republic, and persecution by intelligence agencies of civil society.”<sup>15</sup> The year-long intervention ended the 20-year of *caudillo* rule of Carlos Juárez but almost immediately began the now 20-year rule – and counting – of the current governor, Gerardo Zamora.

The variations of the feudal model we examine has endured for decades across multiple administrations of different ideological composition. While regimes suffer occasional ruptures, they have not translated into enduring reforms, as shown by the federal intervention of Santiago del Estero. Three notable assassinations – one recent in Chaco and two historic ( in Catamarca and Santiago del Estero)– brought a public backlash and the political changes toppled an individual *Caudillo*, but did not overthrow the system.

The modern consolidation of *caudillo* governance is largely the result of the rise to power of the Peronista Party and its *La Cámpora* faction, founded by former president Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife, former president Cristina Fernández Kirchner (2007-2015), who also served as vice president (2019-2023). The *Cámpora* group is now led by senator Máximo Kirchner, the son of the former presidents.

As we will discuss, the national government, especially under *Cámpora* administrations, dispensed large, disproportionate amounts of federal funds to these

provinces to maintain an often-corrupt provincial party machine that routinely delivered huge majorities of votes for *Cámpora* presidential and legislative candidates.

Our research over the past decade has documented the endemic corruption of past Kirchner administrations that touched almost every facet of government,<sup>16</sup> including Kirchner's gross negligence in the investigation into the 2015 assassination of Alberto Nisman, the prosecutor who linked Iran to terrorist bombing in Buenos Aires in the 1994 and who was about to unveil possible Kirchner collusion in the case just before he was killed.<sup>17</sup> Our research also documents the role of Kirchner administrations in sponsoring radical, authoritarian populist movements.<sup>18</sup>

#### Four Case Studies of 21<sup>st</sup> Century *Caudillos*

In this context it is unsurprising that the four provinces we examine as case studies of this model are all led, or were until very recently led, by adherents of Kirchner and leaders of her party. The four main provinces and their leaders are:



*Figure 6: Former president and Cámpora leader Cristina Fernández Kirchner with governors Insfán (left), Capitanich (center left), and Zamora and his wife Claudia (center right). Far right, Governor Jalil with former president and Kirchner acolyte Alberto Fernández*

- Formosa, where Gildo Insfrán has governed continuously since 1995;
- Chaco, where Jorge Capitanich served three terms as governor (2007-2015, 2019-2023), as well as in senior cabinet positions in the Kirchner administration. He lost his reelection bid for governor in 2023 following federal investigations of the high-profile murder found the plot was linked to close Capitanich associates.
- Santiago del Estero, where Gerardo Zamora and his wife Claudia Ledesma Abdala have governed since 2005. The couple alternates between serving as governor and the national Senate to avoid term limit restrictions;
- Catamarca, where Raúl Jalil, a Kirchner loyalist, has been in office since 2019, succeeding Kirchner loyalist Luisa Corpacci (2011-2019) who was elected to the national Senate. Catamarca, while something of an outlier in the authoritarian model, is included because of the Kirchner loyalist continuance for a decade and because Catamarca is a key part of the globally strategic “lithium triangle” overlapping in Argentina, Chile and Bolivia.

Three of the four provinces share international borders (Formosa and Chaco with Paraguay, Catamarca with Chile). Santiago del Estero, the one province that does not,

serves as a sort of secure warehouse for multiple illicit products flowing through the northern tier of Argentina, including cocaine, cigarettes and precursor chemicals.<sup>19</sup> Catamarca, as noted, has significant lithium deposits and Formosa also has lithium reserves that are smaller and likely more costly to extract, but economically and strategically important, nonetheless. It also has some petroleum deposits.

## The Political Economy of Feudalism

Carlos Gervasoni, an academic who has studied feudalism, said the Argentine provincial model results in the “tilted playing field” phenomenon, where there are elections, but they are neither free nor fair because “the official party has advantages that make it impossible to lose.” Gervasoni also noted that there is no accounting for the transfers of millions of dollars from the national government to the states.<sup>20</sup>

A study of Argentine federalism by the Inter-American Development Bank found that “a common pattern emerges, where provinces are typically characterized by executive dominance, limited political competition, and clientelist political linkages.”<sup>21</sup>

The study further adds that “While economic development is not a strong predictor of democratic governance in the Argentine provinces, in the typical peripheral province

where poverty and lack of education among the majority of the population is widespread, a single leader (*caudillo*) or family clan usually controls the political game.”<sup>22</sup>

The Kirchner dynasty led to the expansion of distributing money from the national government to each province,<sup>23</sup> which has become an enduring form of clientelism and supporting *caudillos* with strong ties to the Peronista/*Cámpora* wing. For example, the province of Santa Cruz, the Kitchner family home state, received a significantly higher percentage in discretionary national funds than distribution formula provided, including an enormous 442 percent surplus during Cristina Kirchner’s first term.<sup>24</sup>

In 2008, at the height of the *Cámpora*’s consolidated power, its staunchest provincial allies reaped significant benefits. The government of Formosa received 95 percent of its total revenues from the federal government, while Santiago del Estero and Chaco each received about 85 percent and Catamarca received about 70 percent.<sup>25</sup> In Santiago del Estero, the trail is even more opaque because one of the banks receiving the funds is partly owned by the province’s financial power broker who has supported despotic governors dating back to the 1990s and who also owns the local newspaper, a construction company, and other powerful economic interests.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this large transfer of funds from the central government, far higher per capita than the federal transfers

to most provinces, these four provinces are among the highest six in the nation in poverty and extreme poverty, according to sparse data available. In each one, the combined rates of poverty and extreme poverty were above 50 percent of the population.

This system of massive subsidies is used to reward provincial loyalty and punish those outside the system. The rewards are often in the form of corrupt payments, such as those theoretically destined to those who are physically handicapped or unable to work, which are instead directed to party loyalists.

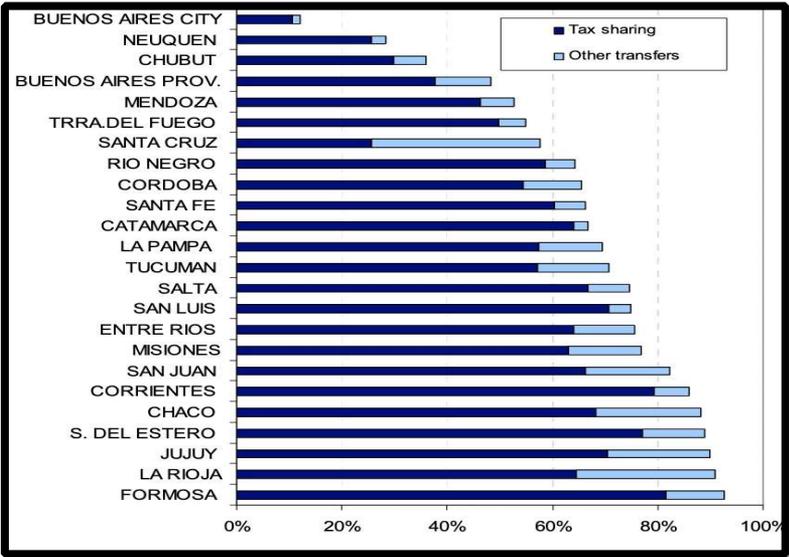


Figure 7: Federal Transfers to Provinces as Percentage of Total Revenue (2008) Source: IDB

One such case, dubbed “Mega Fraud” came to light during a federal judicial investigation in Chaco in early 2025. Investigators found that 700 of the 840 people receiving disability benefits in one town were not disabled. When the investigation and audit touched a town in neighboring Formosa province, more than 1,000 people “spontaneously renounced their disability pensions, claiming they had been miraculously cured.”<sup>27</sup>

Control of these resources with no accountability creates a self-reinforcing dynamic where:

Most provincial governments are resource-hungry political units eager to extract fiscal favors from the national government. In turn, the federal government needs votes in Congress to implement nationwide economic policies, cooperation in national elections, as well as general good will and compliance from provincial governments. This situation creates potential gains from trade between presidents and governors, while Congress merely serves as the “ratifier” of agreements that are struck in other more informal arenas.<sup>28</sup>

Each of these factors of codependence through corrupt economic and political networks linking the subnational to the national power structures are components in the chains of impunity that tie provincial governments to transnational organized crime, as well as attacks on political enemies and a crippling of civil society. We will

examine some of the consequences in the four provinces studied.

# Formosa

No province exemplifies the functioning *caudillo* model in its totality as completely as Formosa, governed since 1995 by staunch Kirchner ally Gildo Insfrán, who is now locked in a high-profile judicial standoff with the national supreme court, which in December 2024 ruled that his 2003 change to the provincial constitution to allow unlimited reelection was, in fact, unconstitutional.

Insfrán, in rejecting the ruling, said no one from the capital of Buenos Aires (*ningún porteño*) could dictate laws in Formosa. His opponents compared him to Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro for his actions and asked the federal government to take over the administration of the province.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 8: Formosa Province Map and Key Statistics

Insfrán’s power structure is rooted in his total control of provincial institutions, nepotism (at least 15 family members work for the province, including two daughters, a brother and son-in-law) and iron fisted control of the resources that flow from the central government. These resources make up more than 90 percent of the provincial government and an estimated 68 percent of those employed in the formal work market are public employees,

among the few with access to health and retirement benefits.

This skewed economic distribution is not because Formosa is a resource poor province. In addition to cattle, forestry, and oil, it also has lithium deposits that, while smaller and harder to exploit than those in Catamarca, nonetheless are significant.<sup>30</sup> Because of the provincial powers discussed earlier, the province of Formosa, rather than the Argentine state, controls the exploitation of these resources, including lithium. An experimental extraction plant has been in development since 2023, let by Argentine, Chilean and Canadian firms.

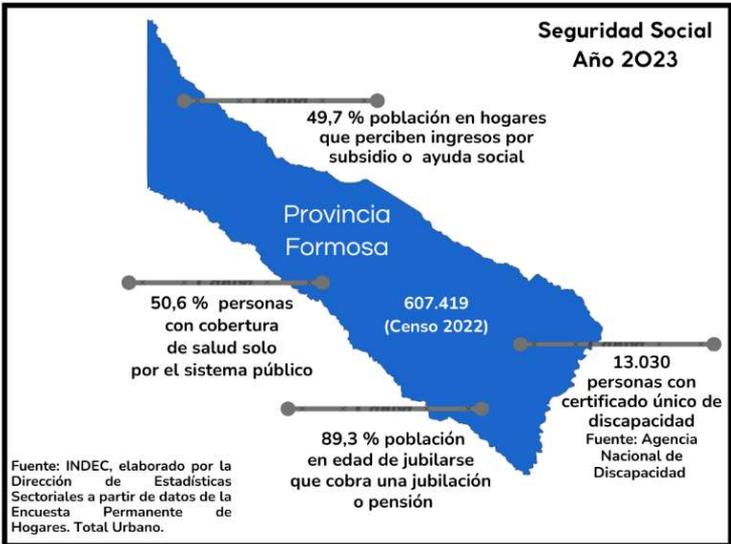


Figure 9: Graphic from Argentine government, demonstrating high levels of poverty in Formosa province, including high levels of household dependence on state support

As a result of the generous flow of resources and the ability to direct them at his personal discretion, Insfrán has delivered election after election for the *Partido Judicialista* that he and Kirchner belong to, along with the provinces' subservient senators and deputies to ratify the Kirchner agenda on a national level. In addition to the endemic nepotism and corruption, Insfrán now controls 20 of 30 deputies in the provincial legislature; Insfrán has “colonized the judicial system, guaranteeing impunity for the governor and his entourage.”<sup>31</sup>

This structure has led to a province in which Insfrán is “owner and boss, a true feudal lord who has annihilated all institutions, controls the three branches of government, persecutes the few remaining media outlets, and brooks no dissent. And one who possesses an incalculable fortune.”<sup>32</sup>

Over the decades, Insfrán has had free rein to name loyal judges, prosecutors, police officials and intelligence operatives, leading to a situation now where “the state security apparatus persecutes the opposition while contraband and drug trafficking operate with impunity.”<sup>33</sup> This has led to repeated reports of systematic violations of human rights in the province, including lack of due process, illegal surveillance, illegal land seizures, selective prosecution of perceived enemies, and other abuses.<sup>34</sup>

In a 2009 report, Amnesty International documented the systematic “discrimination, exclusion and poverty” facing

indigenous populations in Formosa, including illegally appropriating territorial lands without compensation and “breaking the collective will of communities by threatening and coopting members, setting up parallel associations...and using authorities’ signatures as blank cheques.”<sup>35</sup>

Under Insfrán’s governance, the porous riverine border with Paraguay, with nine formal crossing points and countless unofficial informal transit zones, has grown from a traditional hub of contraband and smuggling of cigarettes, fuel and electronics to a major artery for cocaine flows and synthetic drugs heading south to the transshipment centers of Rosario and Buenos Aires.<sup>36</sup> This is in part because National Route 11 and National Route 81 traverse Formosa, offering a relatively quick transshipment route for illicit products onward to the provinces of Chaco and Salta and from their onward.

According to police reports, trafficking gangs operate jointly on both sides of the border, own land and businesses on both sides, and the illicit economies circulate so freely through the border region that the border is little more than imaginary. The reports note a sharp increase in Formosa’s border region in multiple other crimes, including human trafficking, often for sexual exploitation; trafficking in minors, often for sexual exploitation; and trafficking in laborers, often held as slaves, to work harvests of different crops in both countries.<sup>37</sup>

Drug trafficking in Formosa has expanded due to both government laxity and because the province's geographic location is ideal for moving illicit products, with unpatrolled waterways and forests. Despite multiple allegations and accusations by political opponents of the involvement of Insfrán's family members and inner circle in drug trafficking, no charges have been filed. For example, in 2016 a truck belonging to Insfrán's niece was stopped carrying 2.5 tons of marijuana but was not prosecuted.<sup>38</sup>

As a member of the national Chamber of Deputies, Mariana Zuvic (2019-2023) publicly listed multiple cases where Insfrán and his family members were allegedly involved in trafficking synthetic drugs, cocaine and other illegal substances, while charging that Formosa was the epicenter of narcotics trafficking in Argentina. She called Formosa a "prison with 500,000 inmates" due to Insfrán's ongoing violations of human rights and rule of law.<sup>39</sup>

Insfrán has widely been reported to directly control armed bands on both sides of the border to carry out different "tasks." An October 2024 incident, widely reported in the local media, appeared to confirm this. Atilio Basulado, an outspoken critic of Insfrán and mayor (*intendente*) of the small town of Las Lomitas in Formosa, crossed the border to Paraguay with his family when he noticed that he was being followed by two men on motorcycles who appeared to be armed.

Alarmed, Basualdo pulled into a shopping center and went into a restaurant and watched as the two men dismounted and changed their clothes. Basualdo got mall security to call the police, who arrested the two, and found that they were badge carrying Formosa policemen driving a vehicle registered to the Formosa police department.

“They weren’t just there to do intelligence on my movements,” Basualdo told the local media.

“They were hitmen. I am sure their task was to kill me” because of his clashes with the governor.<sup>40</sup>

Formosa represents, as one law enforcement analysis concluded,

A feudal regime in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: a hegemonic political power that influences or captures the other state powers, creating confusion between the interests of the nation and the personal/familial interests of the governor.

On the ground, this creates ideal conditions for organized crime, either through action (collusion) or omission (liberated zones). The convergence of drug trafficking, contraband, human trafficking and corruption under the protective umbrella of a monolithic political power has led to the “kingdom of evil” in Formosa. The consequence is a hostage population with two scourges: the lack of alternating

political power on one hand, and on the other, the insecurity tied to crimes that are supported or ignored by the institutions that should be combatting them.<sup>41</sup>

# Chaco



Figure 10: Chaco Province Map and Key Statistics

The province of Chaco has many of the *caudillo* structural characteristics of the model in Formosa, with a highly authoritarian, personalized and enduring economic, political and social structures that benefit a small group of people tied to the Kirchner power structure.

However, unlike Formosa under Insfrán, the governing structure in Chaco has suffered a rupture that has, perhaps only temporarily, removed Cámpora/Kirchner loyalists, represented by long-time leader Jorge Capitanich, from office. While Capitanich has not held uninterrupted formal power like Insfrán, he has dominated provincial political life for more than two decades. In each of his positions of power he faced and survived multiple allegations of corruption and abuse of power.

However, the 2023 murder of a prominent young woman who married into a family that is part of Capitanich's inner circle, set off a wave of protests in the province just two weeks before the election. A police investigation linked seven Capitanich henchmen to the killing and all are indicted. Capitanich, denying any knowledge of the murder, narrowly lost his reelection bid.<sup>42</sup>

The investigation into that murder showed both the interlocking networks of judicial and police corruption that almost always guarantee impunity, and that, in extraordinary cases when public reaction bursts into anger, that impunity can, at least temporarily, be broken.

It is important to note that Chaco also plays a larger role in the region's cocaine trafficking networks, serving as a key transit point for cocaine movements from Bolivia and Paraguay. Given the complete control of the province's police, intelligence and courts, police investigators say

there is little chance these illicit economies could operate without official protection.

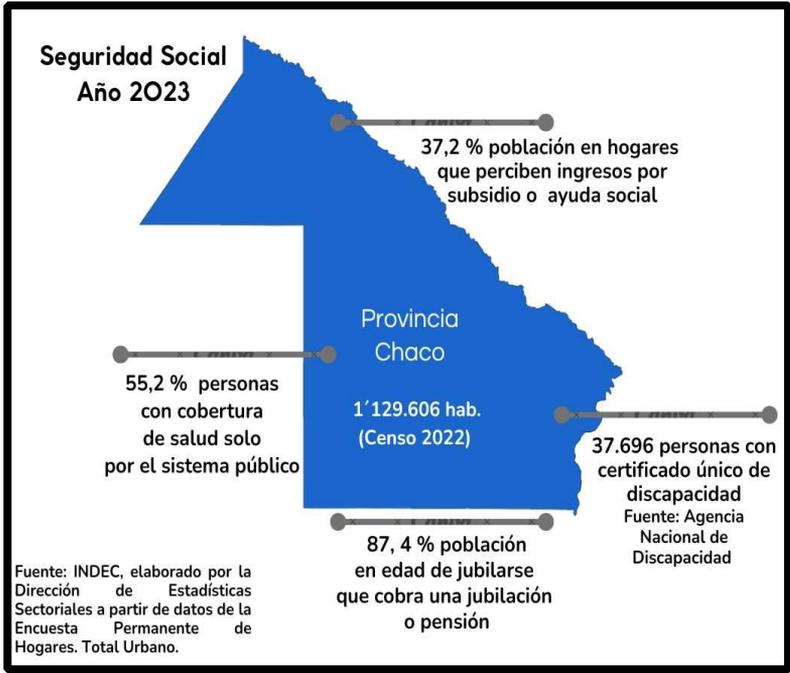


Figure 11: Graphic from Argentine government, demonstrating high levels of poverty in Chaco province, including high levels of household dependence on state support

Chaco's business climate is dominated by mineral, forestry, and agricultural production, which accounts for the overwhelming majority of economic activity within the province.<sup>43</sup> The region is well-known for its corn and sorghum production, as well soybeans and other cereal cash crops. These products are transported through the

riverine barge system that serves as the lifeblood for the region's transportation infrastructure.

“Each of the departments produced around 72-80 thousand tons. Chaco's oilseed production is transported through Paraná-Paraguay rivers system to the industrial cluster of Rosario Hub to be crushed and/or exported. The major ports in Chaco are Barranqueras and Vilelas (managed by the Association of Argentine Cooperatives, ACA). In 2017, these ports shipped more than half a million tons of grains (soybean, corn and wheat), setting a new record. In 2017, barges transported almost 506 thousand tons of grains, a year-on-year increase of 25.7%. If compared to 2015's records, the number of grain water freights originated in Chaco increased by 76.6%.”<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, a number of the ports used by the province's agribusiness producers and exporters, whose activity has exploded in volume in recent years, are privately owned and operated.<sup>45</sup> Those businesses have also been under scrutiny from federal prosecutors; in August 2024, a federal judge halted further deforestation in the province, a growing concern, while prosecutors investigate an alleged public-private corruption scheme in which businesspeople and local officials “Profit from illegal land clearance.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, as deforestation of South America's second-largest forest ramps up to make room for Chaco's large-scale agriculture industries over the last decade, the region has become targeted by international organizations aiming to preserve the region's biodiversity and limit deforestation. Since 2005, the number of small-scale producers has dwindled dramatically in Chaco, Formosa, and Santiago del Estero, raising international concerns about the implications for conservation efforts.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to a small riverine border with Paraguay, Chaco is traversed by two major "cocaine highways" that police have identified as major transit routes not only for cocaine, but for weapons, human trafficking and contraband.

In addition to the land and riverine routes, one report noted: "The existence of numerous clandestine airstrips in the province used to smuggle cocaine into Argentina suggests that wellfinanced drug trafficking rings operate in the province."<sup>48</sup>

These primary land routes are: Ruta Nacional 11 that connects to the Formosa /Paraguay border crossing of Clorinda with the Chaco's capital city of Resistencia, then south to the city of Rosario, Argentina's drug trafficking hub; and Ruta Nacional 16, which connects the province of Salta – which shares a border with Bolivia– to Santiago del Estero, Chaco and onwards to Corrientes province.<sup>49</sup>

“In summary, Chaco is a key link in the national narco chain,” said one police report. It receives drugs from neighboring border provinces like Formosa and Salta, is used to store, divide and redistribute to other parts of the country.”<sup>50</sup>

Until that unexpected series of events that cost Capitanich the governorship, he was at the center of the Chaco’s political and economic life, where he employed an “planned alternance” strategy, given that the local constitution only allows a governor to serve two consecutive terms at a time. This allowed him to both dominate his home province and become a visible and influential part of Kirchner’s national party structure.

Capitanich served as governor of Chaco from 2007-2013, then rotated out to serve as chief of staff to then-president Kirchner (2013-2015), where he was at the center of multiple corruption scandals. Returning to Chaco, he served as mayor of the provincial capital Resistencia from 2015-2019, ruling by proxy through his handpicked governor Domingo Peppo. He won the governorship again, serving from 2019-2023.

Unlike in Formosa, the Capitanich machine in Chaco, while concentrating power in the unicameral legislature and courts, did not modify the constitution. Instead, he created and supported a sprawling network of social movements, foundations, unemployment offices and organized protest groups (*piqueteros*) he controlled

through nepotism and by providing funds that obligated by the national government.

The resulting massive corruption in schemes like those found in the Mega Fraud case, showed that many of these institutions were alleged to have been involved in siphoning millions of dollars. In that case, four leaders with close ties to Capitanich were arrested for fraud and embezzlement.<sup>51</sup>

In another federal case, a close Capitanich associate who led one of Capitanich's social movements, was arrested after he was filmed counting piles of money he received as part of an embezzlement scheme, then handing the money to his two pre-teen children to carry to a hideaway.<sup>52</sup>

As one senior police analyst noted, “a great deal of the money supposedly sent to social programs and projects ended up as personal property, including new vehicles like pick up trucks and motorcycles, along with cattle and cash, belonging to people who had zero declared income.”

But that political machinery under the direction of Capitanich is now under siege.

On June 2, 2023, 28-year-old Cecilia Strzyzowski, who was the wife and daughter-in-law of top Capitanich lieutenants, entered the home of her in-laws in the city of

Resistencia, the capital of Chaco, and was never seen alive again.

The crime, immediately classified as a femicide, caused a political upheaval in Chaco because Strzyzowski's husband (César Sena), father-in-law (Emerenciano Sena), and mother-in-law (Marcela Acuña) were all members of a multi-million dollar foundation financed by the Capitanich political machine.

Emerenciano and César Sena, along with Acuña were well-known leaders of Capitanich's *piquetero* social protest movement, frequently accused of corruption and political intimidation. Capitanich was the best man at the wedding of Emerenciano and Marcela. At the time of the murder, Emerenciano was running for provincial congress, and Marcela was a candidate for mayor of Resistencia, both as part of Capitanich's political bloc and with his financial backing.<sup>53</sup>

The Sena family “built their empire thanks to their godfather Capitanich,” said one police investigator. Seven people, including César, Emerenciano and Marcela, are now under arrest and charged with complicity in the homicide. The body has not been found.<sup>54</sup>

One possible explanation for the inability to find corpse, according to police investigators, is that Emerenciano frequently stated, within earshot of senior political leaders

of Capitanich's machine, that "anyone that bothers us will end up with the pigs," a macabre allusion to disappearing bodies by feeding them to swine.

The killing just two weeks before the election for governor set off a series of mass marches and protests and placed both Chaco and Capitanich in the national spotlight. Cecilia's mother waged a relentless campaign for justice in her daughter's killing, publicly and frequently denouncing provisional authorities for dragging their feet and demanding the case be turned over to federal authorities. It has not been, but with Capitanich's electoral defeat and sustained national media attention the case moved ahead slowly.

"While the case has advanced, there is a fear that the wall of impunity will keep the case from going forward," said one senior investigator. "If Emerceniano falls, will he take down the police, judges, prosecutors and politicians with him? Will the feudal manor fall?"<sup>55</sup> Already there are cracks. Both Emerceniano and Marcela, originally charged with aggravated homicide, have had the charges against them lowered to acting as accessories in the killing. All the other charges are on appeal in a land where few close to power may want to find the truth.<sup>56</sup>

"Chaco has different facets of organized crime connected to political power, from political violence to structural corruption to narco penetration of the security forces," said

one police analysis. “Each of these phenomena has had some degree of participation, protection or complicit silence by the political and judicial authorities there. The electoral defeat of Capitanich suggests Chaco society punished that coexistence, but the process of unpacking all of the feudal black boxes and secrets is just getting started, and institutions must be greatly strengthened to keep history from being repeated.”<sup>57</sup>

Chaco is also the target of lithium exploration: While it’s unclear how much lithium the region actually holds, exploration has been ongoing, seemingly spearheaded by a Paraguayan-Canadian company, Chaco Minerals.<sup>58</sup> Initial studies by geologists indicate that the region could hold vast reserves.

While financing from the venture primarily comes from Canadian companies, most of the leadership is Paraguayan and appears to have very close ties to the Paraguayan government and a Paraguayan general and Permanent Secretary of the Paraguayan National Defense Council, Máximo Díaz Caceres, sits on the board of the company. Díaz Caceres was recently in the Paraguayan media for a lawsuit he filed against the leading national newspaper La Clave, whose reporting indicated that Díaz Caceres ran a corrupt scheme during the pandemic, charging those wishing to cross the Paraguayan border illegally. He lost his libel suit.<sup>59</sup>

## Santiago del Estero<sup>60</sup>

Santiago del Estero, like Formosa and Chaco, is firmly controlled by a single family of unshakable loyalty to Kirchner and her *Cámpora* movement – current Governor Gerardo Zamora and his wife Claudia Ledesma Abdala. Together they have governed the province with an iron fist since 2005. Kirchner personally chose Ledesma, now a national senator, to serve as acting president in 2020 for several days when the vice president and the president were both absent from the country.<sup>61</sup>

Due to term limits on the governorship, the couple rotates between presiding over the province as a feudal manor where the governor's word is law, and occupying a seat in the nation's senate, leading the Kirchner agenda. They control the unicameral provincial legislature, a foreign trained intelligence structure, the local police force often deployed to protect family properties and businesses, and local financial structures.

Zamora/Ledesma came to power following the iron-fisted rule of another long-governing *caudillo* couple, Carlos Juárez and his wife, Nina Aragonés Juárez, who controlled the province for almost five decades. The provincial regime fell in 2003 when the federal government took over the administration of the province following mass protests,

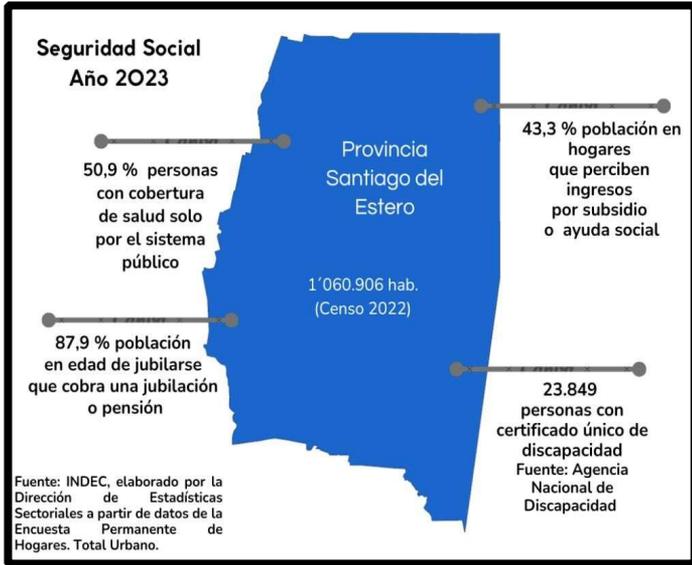
civil unrest and national attention to a double homicide known as La Dársena.

While that intervention jolted the long-enduring model, Zamora won the ensuing elections in 2005 and he and Ledesma have replicated the model, never relinquishing power since the first electoral victory. This is a clear indication that, while the leadership may eventually go too far for the public to accept, the model can endure.

While all the feudal governors seek control the local media, the Zamora structure has been uniquely aggressive in silencing outlets that have investigated or reported on his empire. The

Zamora/Ledesma success is possible because the provincial government not only spends heavily on advertising and announcements but also maintains a large PR machine that churns out positive stories on the government's actions. This has created what one police report described as "Zamora's sphere of silence" in the province.<sup>62</sup>

Among the items the PR machine hypes is the province's inexplicable and ostentatious displays of wealth by the Zamora/Ledesma administrations, despite having almost no tax base, few jobs outside of regional government employers, and one of the highest homicide rates in the country.<sup>63</sup>



*Figure 12: Graphic from Argentine government, demonstrating high levels of poverty in Santiago del Estero province, including high levels of household dependence on state support*

The province has the highest rates of poverty and extreme poverty in the country.<sup>64</sup> Despite this, it boasts a modern international airport, which operates few flights; a world-class soccer stadium, with few teams to fill it; a new track for race cars, with few vehicles that race; a golf course, with a handful of golfers; a state-of-the-art cultural center; and a towering, gold colored statue of Argentine soccer great Diego Maradona, said to be the largest in the world. The statue was unveiled in 2021 under the gaze of Lionel Messi, considered one of the world's top players, along with the rest of the Argentine national team.



Figure 13: Gold painted statue of Argentine soccer hero Diego Maradona (left), and the Estadio Unico soccer stadium in Santiago del Estero. (Photos, IBI Consultants)

Police investigations, regional and national intelligence reports, local residents, and media exposés all point to the reason for these deep contradictions. Santiago del Estero is the epicenter where multiple criminal and corruption networks converge, touching the governor, his family, his wife’s family, and the nation’s powerful *Cámpora*/Kirchner political machine.

“Zamora, Ledesma and Kirchner are an iron triangle of power in a land where time has stood still,” said one civilian intelligence source. “It is really a feudal system, where the *caudillo* runs his *finca* and delivers political muscle to the central government, and in return is given a free hand to steal what he pleases. Each interest protects the other, and the hold so far has been unbreakable.”<sup>65</sup>

This iron triangle is essential to understanding the Zamora/Ledesma *caudillo* model in this province, its illicit networks and how convergence centers for multiple types of transnational criminal activities develop through political authoritarianism and corruption protected both at the regional and national levels.

Part of the reason is that Santiago del Estero sits astride Route 34, one of the most important cocaine arteries of South America. The highway cuts from Bolivia's southern border into the heart of Argentina, intersecting with roads that carry the illicit products south and east to the Atlantic ports and west to Chile's Pacific coast.<sup>66</sup>

In March 2025 federal police forces, carrying out one of the rare counternarcotics operations in the province, found more than 150 kilos of cocaine on banana trucks transiting Route 34. The cocaine bricks were hidden among the tons of bananas moving toward the Atlantic coast.<sup>67</sup>

In 2017 Patricia Bullrich, currently the Minister of Security, who occupied the same post from 2015-2019, coordinated one of the biggest cocaine busts in Argentine history in Santiago del Estero.

She did it by bypassing the local authorities to grab 1,800 kilos arriving by air from Paraguay.<sup>68</sup>

While the province has no international borders, it is located in the center of the provinces that do, including

Formosa, Chaco and Catamarca, making it an ideal warehousing site for multiple transnational criminal organizations operating through multiple illicit economies that need protection and services to get their products to market.

As the global distribution network of cocaine in recent years has shifted from northern South America toward the Southern Cone, with increased production in Peru and Bolivia providing the white powder flowing south through Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay to more lucrative European markets. Santiago del Estero is a key juncture in the emerging map of the global cocaine trade.<sup>69</sup>

Crisscrossing the region are hundreds of secondary roads that serve as airstrips for small aircraft carrying drugs from Bolivia and Peru, that are then fed into the regional distribution network. Often, the aircraft dump their loads while flying at a low altitude before local cartel workers hoist the cocaine bundles onto waiting trucks that scatter to different storage centers. As one headline in a major Argentine newspaper noted, “Rain of Cocaine in Santiago del Estero.”<sup>70</sup>

Radars on Bolivia’s southern border north of Santiago del Estero are supposed to be the first line of defense against the aircraft but function only intermittently. The local police forces are supposed to seize the aircraft when they land or grab the product that is dropped in rural areas.

“The border radars only work for a few hours a day, and police have standing orders not to move when an aircraft is seen dropping white packages from the air,” said one civilian intelligence officer who served in the area for several years. “If the radars are on, they are conveniently pointed away from where the airplanes approach from. If someone grabs a load, it is a competitor of the cartel that dropped it, not a law enforcement action.”

The province is also a key node in the route of contraband vehicles and goods that for decades has smuggled goods from the port of Iquique in northern Chile, to Bolivia, Paraguay and beyond. The large trucks loaded with smaller cars are dubbed “mosquito trucks” because they swarm the highways after dark usually moving cars stolen or from Asia, the United States and Europe and resold in the booming used car business often tied to money laundering activities.

## Opaque Projects with Ties to Rising Global Lithium Trade

Perhaps the most ambitious project to date is the recently announced joint venture lithium battery project with the backing of Argentine state companies who are partnering with Chinese state companies. Northern Argentina, Bolivia and Chile jointly hold some of the largest lithium deposits

in the world, including in regions adjacent to Santiago del Estero.

Global lithium demand is soaring, as is the price of the commodity. The “Consortium for Cooperation for the Manufacture of Ion Lithium Cells and Batteries” is managing the project, which was announced as the largest such factory in Latin America. Lithium is a vital resource for building electric vehicle batteries, computers, and a host of other products necessary to drive the global green revolution and cut dependence on fossil fuel consumption.

As usual, establishing the role of PRC companies through public records searches is difficult because they often do not meet the required reporting requires, as is the case with the companies discussed here. This is further complicated by the fact that the Zamora provincial administration, among the least transparent in the country, can negotiate directly with the investing companies, meaning that the true ownership structures, contracts and payments will likely be kept secret.

## Abuses Garner Attention of International Human Rights Authorities

Human rights violations by provincial police forces and other groups link to Zamora/Ledesma are also a chronic issue, although there is no record of any state official being arrested, tried or convicted for any of the alleged attacks.

In April 2022 a coalition of human rights and civil society groups sent a formal denunciation to the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCR), alleging the “weak institutionality” of Santiago del Estero led to

torture and deaths at the hands of police officers, political harassment, arbitrary arrests of protesters, threats against family members, and collusion between judges and prosecutors. These violations have been directed by the provincial government of Santiago del Estero, including police, political, judicial officers, aimed at silencing dissident voices, protect those with ties to power, threaten victims and cover up criminal networks tied to public officials and their families.<sup>71</sup>

Another key area of contention is tied to human rights abuses are the multiple accusations of Zamora-Ledesma family using the pliable judiciary to appropriate tens of thousands of acres of land for personal benefit. To do this, they first pay impoverished indigenous communities to

invade large landholdings, before expropriating the land supposedly on the communities' behalf.

According to 2022 interviews with residents, law enforcement officials and national intelligence officials, during this process the indigenous communities usually end up with less than half of the expropriated land, while the Zamora-Ledesma family either holds the rest or sells it for enormous profits. The lands attacked are often prime territory on the multiple drug trafficking routes that run through the province.

The most active peasant movement in the region, the Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero (*Movimiento Campesino Santiago del Estero* – MOCASE) that is often involved in land occupations and informal seizures, is closely aligned with Kirchner and the Zamora-Ledesma political machine. The support is public, and the group has openly campaigned for all three as part of the political tickets on the ballots. These ties make getting independent judicial rulings on land disputes, particularly those that target the Kirchner and Zamora-Ledesma, almost impossible.



Figure 14: MOCASE posters supporting Kirchner (taken from X)

In October 2024 the Miami-based Interamerican Institute for Democracy denounced a series of land seizures and repressive measures by the provincial government in Santiago del Estero, noting that the incidents had been reported to judicial authorities and that the judicial system, through its inaction and acts of omission “has strayed from the search for truth and committed an injustice against a citizen of with scarce resources or education.”<sup>72</sup>

The land seizures are a conflict of long standing. Bullrich said during her first stint as minister that she asked the Zamora “eight million times” to stop the land seizures and that every time Zamora promised action but never did anything. “It is the law of the jungle” in Santiago de Estero, Bullrich said, referring to Zamora’s hold on the judges and string of implausible judicial ruling aimed at supporters of

political opponents. She said that “there cannot be even one corner of the country where the rule of law isn’t respected.”<sup>73</sup>

There is little indication that the Zamora/Ledesma grip on power is loosening, despite now facing the hostile Milei government that has cut federal funding but failed to establish more accountability or transparency in the province.

Unless there is a political shock to the system like La Dársena, one analyst noted, “the triad of corruption, institutional cooptation and organized crime will continue to operate with alarming normalcy in the province.”<sup>74</sup>

# Catamarca

Since 2011 the Catamarca governor has been a Kirchner loyalist, but the province is a less consolidated adaptation of the feudal *caudillo* model than the other three provinces studied.

Given the lucrative, significant, and strategic lithium exploitation under provincial control and the potential revenues, it remains of significant interest not just for its implications within the region, but on the global competition for strategic minerals. Catamarca has 14 lithium projects in various stages of development and production, in addition to over a dozen other metal and non-metal mines.<sup>75</sup>

This is particularly true because, in a province with a very high concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a small number of family groups, there have already been multiple cases of provincial government corruption in awarding mining titles, land ownership fights and permitting issues.

A recent study by Transparency International branch in Argentina found that the risk of stateowned mining enterprises benefitting “from preferential treatment with respect to mining rights,” to be “very high,” along with the risk of permit manipulation and state capture of mining companies.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to lithium, Catamarca is a major producer of gold and other minerals, and its border with Chile has been an historical route for contraband, human trafficking, and the regional sex trade. However, according to police reports, it is not a major cocaine transit route, despite reports in 2011 that Mexican drug cartels were purchasing large tracts of land in Catamarca and establishing more than 1,500 clandestine landing strips there for cocaine deliveries.<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless, Catamarca, now entering its fourth consecutive period of Kirchner aligned governors, is increasingly relying on the authoritarianism, coercion and the discretionary disbursement of federal funds with little accountability, to maintain control of lucrative economies. Jalil has traveled to China and elsewhere seeking investments for new lithium deals, stressing the primary role of the provincial rather than the federal government in approving permits.<sup>78</sup>

Much of the identified corruption, nepotism, judicial irregularities and coercive structures center on the mining industry, the province's most lucrative and active economic sector. The immediate flashpoints, in addition to the lack of transparency, are the environmental destruction of lithium mining and land disputes with indigenous communities that historically live in these environmentally fragile areas where lithium is usually found.

Lithium mining requires enormous amounts of water – almost 2 million gallons per ton of mineral extraction, and the lithium deposits in the Lithium Triangle mostly sit in flat, arid highlands that are among the driest spots on earth.<sup>79</sup>

One of the richest deposits is the 31,000 hectare *Salar del Hombre Muerto* reserve, which began operations in the 1990s and has generated millions of dollars in tax revenue for the province. When foreign companies moved to expand the operation in 2021, a coalition of indigenous communities and environmental activists in Catamarca sued to halt the move.

In a surprise decision that showed the limits of the Catamarca authoritarian model, the communities won, and the Catamarca Supreme Court set an “historical precedent in environmental law. It establishes – as a constitutional obligation – that the provincial state has to carry out a cumulative and integral environmental impact assessment taking into account the different mining projects operating in the area,” said Santiago Kozicki, one of the indigenous lawyers. “It also recognizes that there is an irreversible environmental damage, as mining operations have dried up a local river.”<sup>80</sup>



Figure 15: Map of Catamarca's mining industry, the most important center in Argentina.

Jalil's immediate decision to denounce and attack the ruling while pressuring to have it reversed show the victory could be fragile. The provincial government also went out of its way to stress the judgement did not apply to existing mining or preclude new operations if there were an environmental study.

Unsurprisingly, the mining companies operating in the province quickly endorsed this interpretation of the ruling. However, the ruling was seen as a major blow to the Jalil/Kirchner political and judicial machine in the province.<sup>81</sup>

“The relationship of political power and judicial power in Catamarca shows an ambivalent evolution,” said one analyst. “Since the killing of María Soledad Morales, no governor has dared to try to such a big cover up but there is still a silent complicity in cases of administrative corruption, seen in the slow pace of investigations into nepotism, irregular contracting cases and corruption.”

## Historical Background

When the notorious Saadi dynasty (Vicente and his son Ramón), which ruled this mineral-rich province for more than four decades as part of the authoritarian Peronist regime, suddenly collapsed in 1990, Catamarca for a time veered off the *caudillo* path and has not fully returned to having a monolithic governing structure controlling province’s political, judicial and economic life.

In the familiar series of events, the collapse followed the September 1990 high profile rape and murder of a 17-year-old woman and ensuing coverup of official complicity.

The murder sparked the famous mass silent vigils for María Soledad Morales, who had been drugged before being abused and killed. The horrific nature of the crime, coupled with police obstruction, witness intimidation, evidence tampering and ties to the Saad family led to a brief federal intervention and elections in 1991 and the end of Saad dynasty.

The protests were so massive and so effective because of the mass mobilizations already underway demanding an accounting of the thousands of “disappeared” under the military regimes of the 1970s-80s. Morales was a fresh reminder of the brutality of the recently past abuses for which civil society was already demanding justice.

Those protests were led by a Roman Catholic nun, Martha Pelloni, who rose to prominence in the vigils for Morales and remains an outspoken critic of feudal governors, particularly Insfán in Formosa. In a 2023 interview she said Insfrán oversees “a tyrannical government” that colludes drug trafficking, sexual slavery and armed groups that preside over “so many victims dying under suspicious circumstances.”<sup>82</sup>

In the elections following the federal intervention the opposition party won four consecutive gubernatorial elections, but with three different candidates. Rather than wage war on the residual Juárez officials, the opposition, over 16 years, gradually moved new political actors into the police, judicial and legislative structure, creating a less unitary governing structure even with the return of Kirchner allies. In addition, the deep psychological weight of the Morales killing and ensuing official coverup has limited the authoritarian creep.

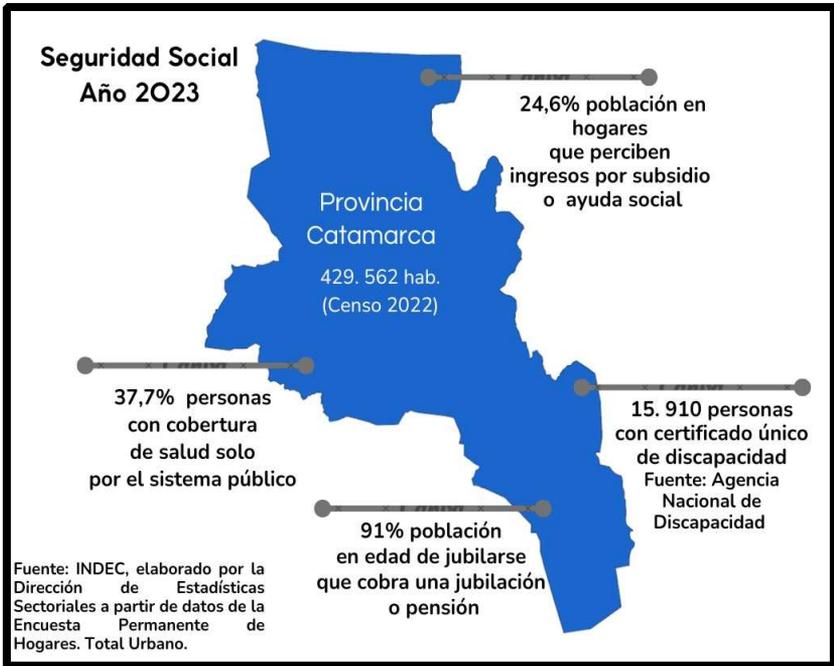
The return of the Kirchner wing of the Peronista movement with Lucía Corpacci in 2011 and again in 2015, followed by her protégé Raúl Jalil in 2019 and again in 2023, show

how the political elites in these small provinces can reconfigure and adapt the *caudillo* model within the parameters of public tolerance, and both created significant nepotism networks within the provincial government, a recurrent issue in remote provinces with a history of small economic and political elite.

For example, in Catamarca former governor and now senator Corpacci is the niece of a former governor and was married to a cousin of Saadi, while Jalil comes from a prominent business family that own media companies and a local bank.<sup>83</sup>

Despite this, election irregularities have been far less than in the other provinces. With some 45 percent of the workforce employed by the provincial government (a high number but lower than the other provinces), both Corpacci and Jalil relied heavily on the use of federal allocations to the province to build loyal political machines based on employment and contracts.

Catamarca is also ranked third in provincial nepotism, after Jujuy and Formosa provinces, with 10 relatives of the governor or senior officials employed by the government.<sup>84</sup> Even so, Catamarca ranks well above the other provinces in rates of poverty and social exclusion, although the numbers are significantly below the national average.



*Figure 16: Graphic from Argentine government, demonstrating high levels of poverty in Catamarca province, including high levels of household dependence on state support*

Catamarca is both a look at how slow change in feudal governance has been in Argentina, a one of cautious optimism that, with an active civil society responding to abuses, the feudal structures can weaken and perhaps even fall. The province is less authoritarian than it was, but moves toward liberalization remain fragile and unconsolidated.

# Conclusions

The power and impact of subnational, feudal governance structures, both in Argentina and elsewhere, is a phenomenon that has been little studied but of significance in understanding how authoritarian models can thrive in a country governed by weak but functional democratic norms and institutions at the national level.

Argentina's strong provincial and autonomous constitutional structure has had the impact in concentrating power in the hands of governors operating far from capital of Buenos Aires, in more remote regions where the presence of the national government has historically been seen only during electoral seasons.

The skewed distribution system of federal funds, supposed to be done by a uniform disbursement formula, was leveraged by the Kirchner governments to provide a new and lucrative way to ensure electoral victories through a network of patronage systems across the country. The four provinces examined here are among the largest beneficiaries.

This system, while favoring local and regional political and economic elites, has kept the provinces studied in abject poverty, creating a loop where the governor provides jobs, contracts, access to education, healthcare and other government services to those who are part of the federally

funded provincial machinery, while excluding those who do not want to join the party.

Beyond that, the system makes it virtually impossible for job-creating investments in those provinces unless the investors are willing to join the provincial elite's closed economic group. Thus, in remote areas where less than half the working population has a formal job, the only opportunities to advance economically and socially are directly tied to one's loyalty to the governor. The governor's survival, in turn, depends on delivering votes for votes for the ruling party and pliable representatives to the national legislature.

How to break down these opaque walls of impunity, autocratic control and lack of substantive democratic process is a key challenge for political outsider Javier Milei, who won the presidency of Argentina in November 2023 but has almost no representation in either the lower chamber or Senate in the Congress.

In a conundrum that eluded a solution for his non-Peronista predecessor Mauricio Macri (2015-2019), Milei needs Congressional support to enact his radical reformist agenda, but the only way to obtain that support is to work through the provincial machinery that provides the legislators.

One of Milei's initial actions was to slash automatic payments of federal government to the provinces, a key

lifeline of corruption and patronage for the feudal governors. However, Milei, like Macri, has found it necessary to creatively avoid their own unpopular budget slashing to the provinces in order to purchase political support for key projects.

Given that Milei's party holds only a small minority of seats in the Congress, his primary method providing support to governors has been to replace the automatic government transfers, which he cut, from a much smaller discretionary funds controlled by the presidency known as National Treasury Supports (*Aportes del Tesoro Nacional-ATN*), which is supposed to be in emergencies. As legislative elections near in 2025, the Milei government has already dispersed more ATN funds in the first quarter of the year than in all of 2024.<sup>85</sup>

The fate of Milei's reform project is not yet written, but, if the past is prologue to the future, any chance of success will pass through the undemocratic *caudillos* that still rule much of Argentina.

## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Douglas Farah, “Fourth Transnational Criminal Wave: New Extra Regional Actors and Shifting Markets Transform Latin America’s Illicit Economies and Transnational Criminal Alliances,” Florida International University, Gordon Institute for Public Policy, June 19, 2024, accessed at: [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi\\_research/64/](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi_research/64/) In this study the author identifies the First Wave as Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel’s pioneering mass exports of cocaine to the United States; the Second Wave as the rise of the Cali Cartel and the shift of primary routes from the Caribbean to Mexico for

cocaine destined for the U.S. market; the Third Wave as the rise of the criminalized states of the Bolivarian Revolution led by Venezuela using transnational organized criminal alliances as instruments of state policy; and the Fourth Wave as shifting cocaine markets to Europe, the rise of synthetic drugs and the emergence of new extra regional criminal actors in multiple illicit economies.

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- <sup>8</sup> Farah, “Fourth Transnational Criminal Wave: New Extra Regional Actors and Shifting Markets Transform Latin America’s Illicit Economies and Transnational Criminal Alliances,” op. cit.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Juan-Peron>

- <sup>10</sup> Martina Jaureguy, “40 years later, a look back at the day Argentina recovered democracy,” Buenos Aires Herald, December 9, 2023, accessed at:  
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- <sup>23</sup> This formula of disbursing percentages of national taxes on fuel and other commodities is called co-participation (*Coparticipación*), which has automatic distributions and

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<sup>25</sup> Martín Ardanaz et al, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Farah, “Lithium Mining in Argentina’s Northwest District: The PRC, Feudal Governors and No Accountability,” op. cit.

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- <sup>35</sup> “Solutions to the Historic Violation of Indigenous Rights Will Only be Found Through Respectful Dialogue, in Good Faith, With Indigenous Peoples,” Amnesty International, 2009.
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