

Discovery of dead youth's body raises specter of forced disappearances in Argentina

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The recovery of a body last Tuesday in the Chubut river in the southern Argentine province of the same name has sparked mass protests across the country and demonstrations internationally.

Eleven weeks after a crackdown by the Gendarmerie against the indigenous Mapuche community led to the disappearance of a young demonstrator, search operations in the area located remains carrying his ID. As the forensic tests began Friday morning, the country waits anxiously to know whether this is the 28-year-old Santiago Maldonado.

The case has created a sense of deep distrust towards the conservative government of President Mauricio Macri and all the official institutions of the capitalist state involved. Not only was the corpse found 1,000 feet upstream from where he was last seen, but three previous searches in the same area had not found the body, which could suggest it was dumped at a later date.

Amid growing social opposition and anticipation that social cuts, price hikes or *tarifazos*, and attacks against jobs and wages will escalate after Sunday's mid-term elections, this case has raised the prospect of a return to the methods of brutal state repression when tens of thousands of workers and youth were disappeared during the US-backed military juntas of the 1970s and 1980s across Latin America.

At the same time, the official opposition against Macri, led by the Peronist parties and the pseudo-left Left and Workers' Front (FIT) have responded by turning the image of Maldonado into an electoral ad and a cover for a shift to the right of the entire political establishment, a maneuver made more explicit by the electoral context.

In Cushamen, located in the northeast region of Chubut, the Mapuche Autonomous Movement of Puel Mapu had set up a "*Pu Lof* (community) of resistance" in May 2015, claiming ancestral lands in a section of the 900,000 hectares owned in Argentina by the billionaires of the

Italian Benetton family. The Mapuches have established a small settlement, which has been raided violently several times and burned down by the national Gendarmerie and the Chubut Police.

This year, the efforts to intimidate and expel the Mapuches were escalated, using live ammunition against the tents and making arrests. On July 31, Santiago Maldonado arrived at the Lof to support a demonstration for the release of the Mapuche leader Joanes Huala. That same day, the chief of staff of the Ministry of Security, Pablo Noceti, held a meeting with local authorities to coordinate an operation to clear the Lof.

Early on August 1, the planned confrontation began with 137 gendarmes cracking down on a road block set up by the Mapuches, where Maldonado was present. The military police then entered into the *Pu Lof* without a warrant and illegally shot live rounds, according to witnesses, and charged violently against those present, including children.

According to a lawyer defending the Mapuches, Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, that early morning Maldonado fled with several others as soon as shots were heard and hid near the Chubut river. Witnesses say that a group of officials caught up with them and, while some of the demonstrators were able to flee across the river, one person was arrested and placed in a van while several officials blocked its doors. Others detained were taken and imprisoned temporarily outside of the community, but Maldonado was unaccounted for.

The testimonies of the gendarmes and their superiors have contradicted each other, in terms of what happened at the river and whether a body was seen floating or not—downstream. According to *Infobae*, the family of Maldonado has denounced gaps in the video recording of the operation.

The court order to take evidence from the police precincts and the vehicles used by the state forces—as part

of an illegal raid implicating the highest levels of the government—was not given until a week after the events, with the prosecutor acknowledging that evidence could have been tampered with by then.

However, audios were found in the messaging app Whatsapp of several cellphones taken from the gendarmes present at the August 1 operation that constitute perhaps the most chilling evidence not only of a kidnapping, but also of a deliberate cover-up and of the dictatorial attitude of the officials. “Apparently, he said that he had [Santiago] Maldonado in his pickup, the one of Sergeant Sartirana,” indicates an audio sent by a gendarme to a superior. Another recording mentions the hiding of the law enforcement vehicles.

Finally, another Whatsapp audio includes an incriminating statement demonstrating the fascistic and murderous mentality of the military police raiding the camp. “We shot them with live rounds (*corchazos*),” one official says, “for them to get some.”

During the proceeding weeks, government officials and the mainstream media sought to promote uncorroborated stories of “sightings” of Maldonado in nearby areas or versions that he crossed over to Chile. More recently, especially after Tuesday’s recovery of the body, the press has sought to lay responsibility on the Mapuches.

The first judge assigned to the case had previously upheld several of the previous crackdowns against the Mapuches and was reportedly being abusive in the interrogations, leading the family of Maldonado to request a change. Nonetheless, the new judge, Gustavo Lleral quickly ordered a new search operation for this week of the territory occupied by the Pu Lof, leading the Mapuche members to complain that they were again being targeted as suspects.

The case is being investigated by as a “forced disappearance,” but the assigned prosecutor stated in a report partially leaked by *Clarín* that the investigation was still inconclusive. Seeing ever larger demonstrations demanding the finding of Maldonado, church leaders as well as business chambers asked for a “solution” without “political party manipulations.”

In mid-September, the minister of Security, Patricia Bullrich, explicitly made clear that the administration’s priority is to reassure the state forces that they will continue enjoying impunity in carrying out such crimes and repression. “We have to defend those who defend us,” she declared on a TV talk show. That same week, sources close to Macri indicated that the blame was going to be pinned on the “performance” of one or two gendarmes.

For its part, the press of the leading party of FIT, the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) reported the finding of the remains on Wednesday, stressing that “everything that happened to Santiago Maldonado since his disappearance... is the sole and exclusive responsibility of Patricia Bullrich, Pablo Noceti and the Gendarmerie.” Moreover, Marcelo Ramal, a candidate for deputy of the FIT’s other major party, the Workers’ Party (PO), told the press at a demonstration Thursday afternoon: “It’s necessary for the [security] minister Bullrich to step down to dismantle the cover-up by the administration and this minister in particular.”

These interventions around the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado are blatant attempts to channel the widespread indignation and opposition against state repression—used to defend the property and interests of the ruling class—behind bourgeois politics, promoting the illusion that a change in ministers or the bringing to power of a new capitalist government will suffice to halt the escalating state repression expressed in the fate of Maldonado and the crackdown against the Mapuches.

On the contrary, the disappearance of Maldonado is a confirmation to the entire working class in Argentina and internationally that, facing a stagnated economy, levels of social inequality incompatible with democratic rights, and geopolitical flashpoints across Eurasia threatening to erupt into a world war, the ruling classes are turning to increasingly authoritarian forms of government.

The Macri administration is preparing to aggressively escalate its social attacks after the elections, beyond the 250,000 job cuts since December 2015 and devastating price hikes it has already overseen. The defense of the social and democratic rights against the growth of social reaction requires the construction of an international and revolutionary movement of the working class against capital and its political representatives of all shades, and for socialism.



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