A long history of struggles, setbacks and hopes

Maria Eva Duarte de Peron

Eva Peron (1919-1952) is one of the most important female political figures in the history of Argentina and is an essential reference when studying Peronism, on the one hand, and women's political leadership, on the other.

As is widely known, Eva Peron (Evita) was the wife of Juan Domingo Peron, president of Argentina three times, 1946-1952, 1952-1958 (government interrupted by the military coup of 1955) and 1973-1974 (interrupted by his passing in 1974). Eva Peron played an active role as First Lady, as President of the Women's Peronist Party, President of the Eva Peron Foundation and "Spiritual Leader of the Nation". Her political action was specifically focused on achieving labour and social rights. Part of these achievements is the law of women's suffrage.

During the period prior to the enactment of Law 13, 010, which established women's suffrage, Eva Peron's public participation was intense, through radio and print, in order to promote and defend it. The law was approved by the National Congress on 9 September, but its enactment was postponed until 23 September. Its text, only seven articles long, would allow women – four years later, in the 1952 presidential elections – to vote for the first time. The speech presented here was delivered on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, on 23 September 1947, immediately after the enactment of the law, which had been signed that day by President Juan Domingo Peron and Interior Minister Angel Borlenghi, within the framework of a popular celebration held in the Plaza de Mayo.

In Argentina, the claim for equal civil rights for women, including women's suffrage, has its origin in the socialist and anarchist militants of the early twentieth century, among whom are Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane, Cecilia Grierson and Alicia Moreau de Justo. On the other hand, women's sectors of the national oligarchy were also in favour of voting rights for women, but with a marked selectivity that did not question the injustice of an established social order that held women back, a questioning that was at the core of Evita's messages. Part of that sector are Victoria Ocampo, Susana Larguia and Maria Rosa Oliver, who in 1936 founded the Argentine Women's Union. Earlier, in 1932, Carmela Horne had founded the Argentine Association for Women's Suffrage.

In the decades leading up to 1947, over thirty more projects were started to promote women's voting rights, but none of them came to be discussed in the parliamentary bodies. The first one dates from 1911, driven by socialist MP Alfredo Palacios, and even predates the Saenz Peña Law of 1912, by which the electoral methods in Argentina are democratised, when the secret, compulsory and universal vote is instituted for male Argentine citizens over the age of eighteen years. However, with the Saenz Peña Law, political fraud could not be avoided, and this allowed conservative sectors to take power during the "Infamous Decade" until the military coup of 1943, an event that would facilitate the rise to power of Juan Domingo Peron three years later through institutional means. Eva Peron's campaign to achieve women's suffrage law is framed within this context and is projected towards the 1952 elections, in which women vote for the first time.

While Eva Peron was driving a shared claim, both with liberal leftist leaders and those of the oligarchy, her speech is "founding" because it establishes, for the first time, a new recipient: it politically calls on women, all women, building a civic consciousness while maintaining the suitable indispensable condition as the "basic pillar of the home". That is, the symbolic space that is gener-

© African Yearbook of Rhetoric 6, 2, 2015, Online ISSN 2305-7785: Maria Eva Duarte de Peron; Ana Maria Corrarello & Ana Laura Maizels (Eds.), "A long history of struggles…", pp. 61 - 64.

ated incorporates women into the political scene but without losing sight of the spiritual values or traditionally assigned gender roles.

Eva Peron's speech announcing women's voting rights establishes women in a politically meaningful place, on a par with the place held during Peronism. In this sense, it builds a national future in tension with the political model of the oligarchic past and puts not only the role of the Peronist woman, but of all women as citizens, at stake. This differentiates it from previous speeches that promoted women's right to vote but were directed, in their claim, only at men or women who had "political awareness".

Ana Maria Corrarello - University of Buenos Aires
Ana Laura Maizels - University of Buenos Aires

Women of my country; I receive at this very moment, from the government of the Nation, the law that enshrines our civil rights. And I receive it, before you, knowing that I do so, on behalf of and as representative of all Argentine women. Feeling, with joy, that my hands are trembling as I touch the laurel wreath that proclaims our victory.

Here it is, my sisters, summarised in the small print of a few articles, is a long history of struggles, setbacks and hopes. That is why there is in it the tension of indignation, threatening shadows of declines, but also the joyful awakenings of triumphal beginnings! And the latter, which translates the victory of women over the lack of understanding, denials and vested interests of the castes, condemned by our national awakening, has only been possible in an environment of justice, recovery and restructuring of the country, which stimulates and inspires the work of the government of General Peron, leader of the Argentine people.

My dear comrades; we have reached the goal we had set for ourselves, after a burning struggle. We faced the falsehood, slander and defamation. Our eternal enemies, the enemies of the people with their demands, put into play all the resources of the oligarchy to prevent this victory. This legion of women who accompany me was ignored by one sector of the press at the service of anti-Argentine interests; from a tiny sector of Parliament, there was an attempt to set back the enactment of this law. This manoeuvre was defeated by the determined and courageous approach of our MP Eduardo Colom. From the public platforms, the men condemned by the people on 24 February, raised their puppet voices, responding to orders not in line with the interests of the nation. But they could do nothing against the decision, the tenacity, the firm resolve of a people like ours, who on 17 October, with Colonel Peron at the head, outlined its historical destiny. Then, as at the birth of our political independence, the women of Argentina played their part in the struggle. We have broken the old prejudices of the defeated oligarchy. We have reached, I repeat, the objective we had set, which we have lovingly cherished throughout the effort. The road has been long and painful. But for the glory of women, tireless defenders of their essential rights, the obstacles against them did not deter them. On the contrary, they provided the push and encouragement to continue the struggle. As these obstacles multiplied, our enthusiasm grew. The more they grew, the greater was our will to

triumph. And in the end, at the very gates of success, the tricks of a falsely progressive opposition, attempted its last blow in order to delay the enactment of the law.

This move against the people, against women, increased our faith. It was and is faith in God, in the future of the Nation, in General Peron and our rights. That is how the mask of the false apostles was torn off, putting an end to the anti-democratic comedy.

But… blessed be the struggle that we were forced to undertake due to a lack of understanding and the lies of the enemies of the fatherland! Blessed be the obstacles with which the leaders of the false democracy of oligarchic privileges and national denial wanted to block our path! Negative factors that ignore the people, look down on the work and traffic in it, unable to understand its militant reserves. Those lies, those obstacles, the lack of understanding, cheered up our spirits. And today, victorious, we emerge aware and emancipated, strengthened and filled with faith in our own strength. Today, we add our civic will to the national will in order to follow the dignifying restorative teachings of our leader, General Peron. We marched at the vanguard of the people that at the polls will bring about the future of the fatherland, with the desire for a greater, happier, more prosperous, more righteous and more effectively Argentine nation; a nation of the Argentines.

I have visited the old countries of Europe, some ravaged by war. There, in direct contact with the people, I learned another lesson in life. The exemplary lesson of the devoted working women who are alongside the men fighting for recovery and for peace.Women who add the contribution of their will, ability and determination. Women who forged weapons for their brothers, who fought beside them, equal in courage and heroism.

My dear comrades: may we be inspired by their example! This triumph represents a duty, the highest duty of the people and to the fatherland. The vote, which offers us participation in the nation's future, throws over our shoulders a great responsibility. It is the responsibility of choice.Or rather, of knowing how to choose; for our cooperation to push nationality towards higher stages of its destiny, sweeping away in its march the vices of those who are opposed to the happiness and wellbeing of the Nation.

With our victory we have accepted this responsibility and we must not give it up! The experience of these last few years, in which we faced the repressed national vocations of economic, political and social justice of the old tyrants, deniers of people's rights, should serve as an example. In moments of significance, Argentine men knew they had to choose the leader of their destiny and identified in General Peron all their yearnings that had been denied, reviled and mocked by the oligarchy that served foreign interests. Can we, Argentine women, do anything other than consolidate this historical conquest? I say no! I proclaim no! And I swear, no, to all the comrades of my country.

The vote we have won is a new tool in our hands. But our hands are not new in the struggles, at work and in the repeated miracle of creation.
We embroider the colours of the fatherland on the liberation flags of half a continent! We sharpen the tips of the heroic spears that imposed national sovereignty on the invaders!

We fertilise the land with the sweat from our brow and dignify factories and workshops with our work. And we will vote with the consciousness and dignity of being women, who have come of age under the restorative government of our chief and leader, General Peron.

We, sisters of mine, have a high mission to fulfil in the years ahead. To fight for peace. But the fight for peace is also a war. A declared war to death against the privileges of the parasites that seek to renegotiate our Argentine heritage.A war to death against those who, in the recent past, shamed our national condition.A war to death against those who want to throw injustice and restraint on our people again. In this battle for the future, in dignity and justice, the fatherland shows us a place we will occupy with honour. With honour and conscience.With dignity and pride.With our right to work and our civic right.

We are women, missionaries of peace. The sacrifices and struggles have only managed, so far, to multiply our faith.

Let us raise that faith, all together, and let us illuminate the path of our destiny with it. It is a great, passionate and happy destiny. We have, to conquer and deserve it, three incorruptible, unshakeable foundations: an unlimited confidence in God and in His infinite justice; an incomparable fatherland to love with passion, and a leader shaped by fate to victoriously confront the problems of this time: General Peron.

With him and with our vote, we will contribute to the perfection of democracy in Argentina. That is all.

Translated from Spanish (Argentina) by Clara Tilve.[1]

[1] Eva Perón, *Discursos* (Selección), Compilación del Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Históricas Eva Perón, Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación, Buenos Aires, (2012).