

ENGLISH EDITION

Milei Loses a Key Player as Anti-Crime Platform Unravels: Espert Withdraws Candidacy After Drug-Trafficking Scandal

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José Luis Espert resigned his bid for a Buenos Aires congressional seat after being linked to a businessman accused of drug trafficking. The crisis exposes fractures within La Libertad Avanza and forces Milei to reorganize his political strategy in the country's most important district.



In the thick of the campaign for the October 26 legislative elections, Argentina’s president, Javier Milei, has lost a pivotal ally: ultraliberal economist José Luis Espert confirmed on Sunday that he was withdrawing his candidacy for national deputy in Buenos Aires province after a so-called “narco scandal” linked him to Federico “Fred” Machado, a businessman sought for extradition to the United States on drug-trafficking and fraud charges.

The controversy and subsequent resignation of La Libertad Avanza’s top candidate leave a vacancy in the nation’s largest and most hotly contested district—dealing a deep blow to the libertarian president’s tough-on-crime narrative.

From denial to resignation

Espert’s fall unfolded over recent weeks after court documents from a case in Texas began circulating, suggesting the economist and sitting deputy allegedly received

funding from “Fred” Machado, who was detained in 2021 and remains under house arrest in the province of Río Negro while awaiting a final ruling by U.S. courts on his extradition.

The Argentine businessman, accused of exporting cocaine to the U.S. through fraudulent aircraft purchases, allegedly transferred \$200,000 to Espert in February 2020 via a trust he shared with his former partner, U.S. businesswoman Débora Lynn Mercer-Erwin, who is also in custody and has been sentenced to 16 years in prison for drug trafficking, money laundering, and fraud.

The financial and logistical support for Espert allegedly dates back to the 2019 presidential race, in which he ran, and the 2021 midterms that carried him into the Chamber of Deputies.

Espert is also said to have taken more than 30 flights on Machado’s aircraft during the 2019 campaign.

These revelations land less than a month before the legislative elections, in which, according to the vast majority of polls, the ruling coalition trails Unión por la Patria.

Confronted with the accusations, Milei’s candidate initially tried to distance himself and deny any link to Machado. “I only saw him once in my life because he offered his help,” he said in a media interview, later arguing that “the flights were handled by party staff.” However, media pressure—and, crucially, internal pressure within his own libertarian space—became unsustainable. The evidence kept accumulating, pulling the rug out from under his initial version.

Cornered, Espert ultimately chose to step aside. In a post on the social network X, he announced that he had put his resignation “at the disposal” of leadership and that President Javier Milei had accepted it.

“In these elections, Argentina once again has the opportunity to turn the page on its sad history. Since the President took office, he has been driving that change with the

effort and support of most Argentines. I offered my resignation and the President decided to accept it. For Argentina, I'm stepping aside," he said.

Far from accepting responsibility, the 63-year-old Espert tried to present himself as a political martyr—claiming to be the victim of a political operation and “a media trial.”

“This is an operation clearly orchestrated by a system that has destroyed Argentina for decades and is sustained by a ruthless media trial against me, which I will no longer lend myself to. Unlike those who use the same weapons every election season, I have nothing to hide and will prove my innocence before the courts, without immunity or privileges,” he argued.

In his statement, he also sent a message to supporters and allies, urging them to stay the course and not get distracted.

“To the leaders and fellow travelers of La Libertad Avanza: don’t let yourselves be manipulated. Any explanations that are needed will be given at the right time and in the proper venue. Use every remaining second before the election to explain to Argentines the opportunity before us, that we cannot squander our efforts, and that this is the only path to reclaim the future,” he said.

Nada que esconder. No somos todos lo mismo. pic.twitter.com/zCF4vQW5iS

— José Luis Espert (@jlespert) [October 3, 2025](#)

Milei’s response

From the Casa Rosada, President Javier Milei publicly backed his now-former candidate's decision, sending a message that prioritizes the survival of the political project over any individual. Avoiding any direct mention of the Machado scandal, Milei leaned into his rhetoric of political persecution and accused opponents of mounting a "malicious operation" against his libertarian project.

"The profound change we are carrying out is the only thing that matters. We will not allow a malicious operation to put it at risk. Argentina always stands above individuals, and guaranteeing change is more important than any one of us," he said.

Far from self-criticism, the Argentine president reinforced his narrative against the opposition, insisting that "even if they try to smear us, we are not the same."

The far-right leader capped his message with a slogan meant to unify his base: "La Libertad Avanza or Argentina goes backward."

Electoral consequences and a narrative that breaks

Espert's resignation has immediate, far-reaching consequences for Milei's government. To start, it leaves a vacuum in Buenos Aires province—Argentina's largest and most competitive electoral district—just three weeks before the legislative elections.

The "narco scandal" strikes at the core of Milei's platform: a frontal fight against crime and the "corrupt caste." The alleged link between one of his leading figures and a drug-trafficking case erodes the libertarian project's credibility, which is already grappling with corruption allegations, such as the reported bribery case at ANDIS that involves Karina Milei—the president's sister and the Presidency's secretary-general—alongside a deep economic crisis and growing social discontent.

As the Fred Machado case proceeds in U.S. federal courts in Texas, José Luis Espert's political future remains in limbo. "Stepping aside," in his own words, may not be merely a temporary gesture to calm the waters, but the beginning of a definitive retreat from Argentine politics, as outlets like *Página/12* suggest. For Milei, this new

judicial scandal has become a credibility and electoral test with unpredictable consequences.

Fuente: [El Ciudadano](#)