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A yoga school falsely described as a "horror cult" close to acquittal from any crime: Analysis

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

On 7 December, the Argentinian newspaper "[LA NACION](#)" titled an article about the Buenos Aires Yogal School (BAYS) accused of criminal activities "The case is back to zero and the defendants are close to acquittal." This was the conclusion of Gabriel di Nicola, the author of the article, after a court of appeal declared the nullity of the elevation to trial of the case.

The decision was taken by Chamber II of the Chamber of Appeals in the Federal Criminal and Correctional Court of Buenos Aires, composed of judges Martin Irurzun, Roberto Boico and Eduardo Farah.

In the BAYS case, seventeen people had been prosecuted for crimes of illegal association, human trafficking for sexual exploitation and money laundering. In the last few years, hundreds of media outlets in Argentina and abroad had presented the yoga group headed by Juan Percowicz, 80, as a "horror cult."

Last September, following a request made by federal prosecutor Carlos Stornelli and his colleague from the Office of the Attorney General for Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons (PROTEX), Alejandra Mangano, federal judge Ariel Lijo had closed the investigation of the case and brought it to trial with 17 defendants, including Juan Percowicz, the 80-year-old leader of the yoga school, who was identified by the prosecutors as the head of the alleged criminal organisation.

9 women declared victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation against their will

Nine women who had attended the classes of the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) accused of alleged trafficking in human beings for prostitution were declared victims of BAYS by two prosecutors of PROTEX despite their repeated and strong denials they had never prostituted themselves.

About this strange procedure, HRWF asked some clarification from Ms Marisa Tarantino, Legal Prosecutor of the Attorney General's Office of the Nation and former Secretary of the Federal Criminal and Correctional Prosecutor's Office No. 2 of the Federal Capital. She is also a specialist in Justice Administration (Universidad de Buenos Aires/ Buenos Aires University) and Criminal Law (Universidad de Palermo/ Palermo University).

Here are some of her legal comments:

First of all, I do not give my opinion on particular cases when I do not know the file but I can give you some technical explanations. What can be understood by "prostitution" is a matter of interpretation, but it is generally understood to be the exchange of sex for money or other benefits of economic value.

Until 2012, sexual exploitation was punishable by Law 26.364 but on 19 December 2012, this law was amended in such a way that it opened the door to controversial interpretation and implementation. It is now identified as [Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims](#).

This law reformed the Penal Code in various articles that provide several criminal classifications for cases of trafficking in persons and exploitation of persons (Art. 125 bis, 126, 127, 140).

According to this law, when the prostitution of others or any other form of offering sexual services of others is promoted, facilitated or commercialized, it is a criminal activity.

*In the amendments to the criminal definitions relating to sexual exploitation, there is an **express mention of the lack of legal relevance of the consent of the passive subject**. At the same time, the reform also transferred the so-called "means of commission" that in the previous law were included in the basic definitions and now form part of an aggravated crime.*

Both decisions result in a radical change in the treatment of prostitution in the criminal sphere.

The key to the reform is that the "means of commission," which were previously defining elements of the crime as they were provided for in the basic definition, are no longer so. Any exercise of coercion, physical violence or even the abuse of a state of vulnerability is captured by aggravated criminal offenses. Thus, the basic definition provides for perfectly autonomous exchanges free from the exercise of violence or coercion.

*In short, if in a particular case the prosecution agencies detect an activity that they classify as **a form of 'prostitution', even if it is exercised by adults and autonomous persons, these will be objectively considered victims** and those who make the activity possible or benefit from it in any way, even if it is occasional, will be liable to prosecution."*

In their report in which they had also requested the arrest of Percowicz, BAYS founder and leader, and the other suspects, prosecutors Stornelli, Mangano and Marcelo

Colombo, the latter also a member of PROTEX, had argued that BAYS collected 500,000 dollars per month and that most of the income came from the sexual exploitation of the 'students.'

After the lawyers of the non-prostitutes, Claudio Caffarello and Fernando Sicilia, were informed of the court decision, they declared to LA NACION:

*"This is a very courageous ruling. **It was proven, with an expert report by the Forensic Medical Corps of the Supreme Court of Justice, that the people identified as victims did not go through situations of vulnerability, that they were not subdued and that they always acted with a free self-control of their behavior.** We have always been convinced that there was no crime in this case."*

Lawyer Alfredo Olivan who together with his colleague Martín Calvet Salas represents eight of the accused considers that their clients should be declared non-guilty of illegal association, human trafficking for sexual exploitation and money laundering. And he announced that he would present a request for the acquittal of all his clients.

About the vulnerability of non-victims falling in the hands of PROTEX

The question asked by HRWF to Ms Marisa Tarantino was: "What are the legal domestic remedies for an alleged victim of prostitution NOT to be recognized as a victim and NOT to be involved in a criminal case against a third party?"

Tarantino's answer was:

Current procedural law expressly recognizes the right of victims to be heard and to have their opinion taken into account. They must be notified of the progress of the proceedings and have the right to request review of those decisions that put an end to the process.

They also have the right to become plaintiffs in order to bring charges against those who are accused. However, victims are not entitled to determine the public criminal action. Sexual exploitation crimes are offenses of public action. Therefore, the decision of a victim not to advance in the criminal process, although she can and should be heard, is not sufficient to close a case. The law considers that in crimes of public action there is a state interest at stake and prosecution must continue even if the victim does not agree. Therefore, prosecutors are obliged to do so unless they rule out the existence of the crime due to lack of evidence or lack of adequacy of the case to the legal requirements of the criminal type.

Damning conclusions

During the whole operation against the yoga school, the methods used by PROTEX were very controversial.

PROTEX fabricated a criminal case on the basis of a botched preparatory investigation and the unreliable testimony of a single person, resulting in the public fabrication of honorable women into sex workers, despite their strong and repeated denial, and as false victims of sexual exploitation.

PROTEX staged a spectacular police operation and a large-scale show of force which the media were informed about with the obvious purpose to benefit from great publicity while it could and should have been organized with discretion and announced afterwards by a press release in measured terms or a press conference.

PROTEX chose to use violence during the flat searches, smashing the front doors when residents offered to open them with their keys.

PROTEX staged a highly visual display of the discovery of cash that was allegedly the proceeds of human trafficking for the purpose of prostitution.

PROTEX filmed the crackdown, but not in a neutral way, to show its alleged professionalism and efficiency, and made the videos public.

As a result of PROTEX's action

- 19 people, including the nearly 80-year-old founder of BAYS, were arrested for alleged criminal activities and spent between 18 and 84 days in prison
- the names of several women described as sex workers, despite their denial, were wrongly made public
- several victims of this police operation have lost their husbands or partners, their jobs or their clients in their economic activities.

Some of the damage is irreparable.

The "horror cult," as BAYS has been described in hundreds of press articles and television programs, never existed. Fake news but real damage.

PROTEX dangerous ideology. How to fabricate "victims of prostitution"

A book by an Argentinian prosecutor criticizes the theory that "all" sex workers are coerced to prostitution. PROTEX goes one step further, seeing prostitutes where there are none.

by Willy Fautré

[Bitter Winter](#) (28.09.2023) - In its frantic quest for victims of sexual exploitation, [PROTEX](#), an Argentinian state agency fighting trafficking in human beings and criminal gangs exploiting prostitutes, has also fabricated imaginary prostitutes and hereby made real victims by alerting the media when it carried out a spectacular armed SWAT crackdown in August 2022 on the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS), [a philosophical belief group](#) allegedly running a prostitution ring, and on some fifty other places in Buenos Aires.

All in all, arrest warrants were issued against 19 persons, 10 men and 9 women, allegedly running a criminal ring. They were all imprisoned and submitted to a very harsh jail regime for pre-detention periods ranging from 18 to 84 days. In two cases, the Court of Appeals revoked the indictment for being unfounded. The others are free and are waiting for the next round.

Fabricated prostitutes

Five women older than fifty, three in their forties and one in her mid-thirties are on the one hand suing two prosecutors of PROTEX on [unfounded claims of their being victims of sexual exploitation](#) in the framework of a yoga school. On the other hand, they are real victims of PROTEX as they now publicly bear the stigma of prostitute, which they strongly deny ever having been. Although prostitution is not illegal in Argentina, the damage is huge in their personal, family, and professional life.

Those fabricated prostitutes were recently interviewed in Buenos Aires by Susan Palmer, an Affiliate Professor in the Religions and Cultures Department at Concordia University in Montreal (Canada) and Director of the Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control Project at McGill University (Canada), supported by the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). These women are not from a vulnerable social class and have not been trafficked into Argentina. They belong to the middle class and had a job. During the interviews they again strongly denied having been involved in prostitution. As of today, PROTEX has not provided any evidence of prostitution, and consequently of any form of exploitation in this framework.

In a 22-page well-documented report published in the July-August issue of [The Journal of CESNUR](#), Susan Palmer highlighted the various facets of the destructive effect of PROTEX operation in the lives of imaginary prostitutes and their imaginary pimps in BAYS.

The arrested persons were accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and money laundering on the basis of [Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims](#).

The legislation against sexual exploitation

Until 2012, this sort of criminal activity was punishable by Law 26.364 but on 19 December 2012, this law was amended in such a way that it opened the door to controversial interpretation and implementation. It is now identified as [Law 26.842](#).

The financial exploitation of prostitution by third parties must undoubtedly be prosecuted in courts as the victims are most often poor local women, female refugees, or women imported for prostitution purposes. Some accept to be considered as victims. Others do not. In this second category, a number of women state that prostitution is their choice because they fear reprisals from their pimp or the mafia ring on which they depend. They may therefore be considered as victims as well by the courts in charge of an investigation, despite their denials.

Other independent prostitutes who are not linked to any network also declare that it is a real life choice and that they are not victims. It is at this point that the interpretation and the application of Law 26.842 become very problematic because the legal system considers them to be victims, despite their denials.

Last but not least, other women who have not been involved in prostitution are held to be victims, against their will, by the judicial system because of an investigation into an organization suspected of sexual exploitation. This is the case of the nine women having attended the Buenos Aires Yoga School who vehemently deny any prostitution activity in their lives.

Abolitionism, a questionable "feminist" concept

Two political standpoints, abolitionism and accommodation, are at loggerheads on the prostitution issue.

With regard to legislation on prostitution, abolitionism is a school of thought that aims to abolish prostitution and rejects all forms of accommodation that authorize it. The supporters of both approaches agree on the decriminalization of prostitution, but abolitionism currently considers "all" prostitutes to be victims of a system that exploits them due to their vulnerability. This viewpoint about the victims and their situation of vulnerability has been adopted by PROTEX.

The original aim of the abolitionist movement was to oppose the accommodation and regulation of prostitution, which among other things imposed medical and police controls on prostitutes.

The accommodation and regulation of prostitution in fact amounted to the establishment of prostitution and the officialisation of procuring. As the neo-abolitionist movement, with a more radicalized vision than that of the original abolitionism, asserted that the most intolerable forms of violence accompanying trafficking and forced prostitution are linked to the impunity of procurers, its aim is to prohibit all forms of exploitation of the prostitution wherever it is susceptible to take place.

The next step was to enlarge the scope of "irregularly authorized" places where prostitution could be exploited by criminal rings, such as "saunas," "pubs," "whisky clubs," "night clubs," "yoga clubs," etc., which were said to be promoted with impunity in the media and in the public space. The Public Prosecutor's Office encouraged the adoption of measures aimed at uncovering the veil of these "houses of tolerance," which are the destination of the trafficking process for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and which enjoy an allegedly spurious and inappropriate legal recognition.

This approach provided an open door to suspicions of sexual exploitation in spiritual groups such as BAYS.

The drifting of PROTEX about the victimization issue

The controversial implementation of the controversial Law 26.842 along with its dissemination in and by the intellectual elite and the judiciary in Argentina was criticized by Marisa S. Tarantino in a book she published in 2021 under the title "Ni víctimas ni criminales: trabajadores sexuales. Una crítica feminista a las políticas contra la trata de personas y la prostitución" (Neither Victims nor Criminals: Sex Workers. A Feminist Critique of Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Prostitution Policies; Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina).

Marisa Tarantino is Legal Prosecutor of the Attorney General's Office of the Nation and was the former Secretary of the Federal Criminal and Correctional Prosecutor's Office No. 2 of the Federal Capital. She is a specialist in Justice Administration (Universidad de Buenos Aires/ Buenos Aires University) and Criminal Law (Universidad de Palermo/ Palermo University). As she has participated in workshops organized by PROTEX, her opinion is all the more valuable. In short, these are a few of her findings:

– “UFASE-PROTEX—which had been one of the agencies strongly linked to the International Organization for Migration to address this issue—was especially dedicated to the task of disseminating the neo-abolitionist perspective, presenting it as the correct paradigm for dealing with cases of trafficking and sexual exploitation. This was reflected in the organization of multiple training courses and workshops, dissemination materials, ‘best practice protocols,’ and even in academic production. All this exerted a strong influence in various institutional spheres throughout the country” (p. 194).

– “Thus, the incorporation of this particular gender perspective, built from the main neo-abolitionist postulates, made it possible to (re)interpret the different forms of organization and exchange of sexual services in terms of criminal conflict and, more precisely, in terms of trafficking” (p. 195).

This is the context generated by the 2012 amendments to the law on trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution by criminal rings and PROTEX’ endorsement of the neo-abolitionist political model that was (mis)used to justify the crackdown on BAYS.

Apart from the political model, PROTEX found an ally in the person of the anti-cultist Pablo Salum who shot all his arrows at non-traditional religious or belief groups in Argentina, including a respected [international Evangelical NGO whose 38 centers were recently raided](#) on alleged charges of trafficking.

The diabolical triangle in the BAYS case: a political standpoint, the fabrication of false victims, the PROTEX and Salum couple

BAYS is the victim of a political model, its judicial architect PROTEX, and the anti-cultist Pablo Salum.

Salum, who had lived with relatives practicing yoga at BAYS until he was a teenager, arrived with an “added value” in the debate. He accused BAYS of being a “cult,” controlling and brainwashing women to involve them in prostitution for the purpose of financing itself. His position was comforted by [a tidal wave of media reports](#), which reproduced his accusations without any check, This is how BAYS became “the horror cult” in Argentina and abroad.

Several reports by foreign researchers have however shown that Salum only spread [fantasies and lies](#) about BAYS and new religious movements to attract the attention of the media on his own person.

Some leaders of PROTEX unwisely started befriending Salum, in whom they saw an opportunity to investigate and prosecute new groups on the basis of charges of human trafficking and exploitation of prostitution.

On the one hand, according to PROTEX, people used for prostitution are all real victims because of the exploitation of their vulnerabilities, even if they fiercely deny it. On the other hand, according to Salum, cults achieve the same result by brainwashing their members and exploiting their weaknesses. The abuse of vulnerability according to PROTEX and the abuse of weakness according to the anti-cultist Salum thus lead to the same result: the creation of so-called victims who are unaware of being victims and deny it.

This explains the trap into which BAYS and the nine women described by PROTEX as unaware victims of prostitution by a criminal network have fallen.

How to get out of this trap? Argentina remains a democracy and justice is the main way out. The Christian group “[Cómo vivir por fe](#)” won its case against PROTEX in November 2022 after a raid instigated by Pablo Salum and accusations of exploitation and organ trafficking. The court criticized Salum for having “coached” and manipulated the main witness.

In the case of BAYS, [brainwashing](#) is a fantasy denounced as a non-existent concept by scholars in religious studies. Concerning the nine female plaintiffs the courts will have to recognize that there is no evidence of sale of sexual services.

The machinations of PROTEX and Co. were recently denounced by CAP/ Liberté de Conscience, an NGO with ECOSOC status, at the [53rd session of the UN Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva.

PROTEX and the judiciary in Argentina would do well to heed this warning shot before losing face in front of the international human rights community [when the ghost of prostitution](#) vanishes in the BAYS case.

Concern about ill-founded accusations of trafficking against a yoga school— A letter to the authorities

Bitter Winter (26.09.2023) - Fighting human trafficking is a worthy enterprise. Weaponizing human trafficking laws to crack down on spiritual minorities and resurrect the dead horse of brainwashing theories is not. Twelve international religious liberty organizations protest.

by Bitter Winter



*Argentine Federal Police posing for media cameras at the door of the State of Israel building during a **PROTEX**-instigated raid against the Buenos Aires Yoga School on August 12, 2022.*

Dear Sirs:

We represent several leading organizations that act as watchdogs for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) throughout the world through publications, conferences, and statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

We are increasingly receiving alarming reports about the situation of FoRB in Argentina and the activities of a special prosecutors' office called PROTEX.

We understand that the aim of PROTEX is to fight human trafficking. It is an important and laudable aim, as trafficking women, men, and children who become forced sex workers or slave laborers is an internationally recognized plague.

We noted, however, some international criticism of Argentinian legislation, which in contrast with international agreements does not consider violence, threats, or deception as necessary elements of the crime of trafficking, only as aggravating circumstances.

We are aware that, in case of slave laborers or sex workers exploited by organized crime, a case law has developed internationally that regards the consent of the victims as irrelevant, as they are terrorized by their exploiters and may risk death if they testify against them.

It seems that in Argentina PROTEX misuses this understandable principle by applying it to women and men who willingly participate in religious and belief-based activities, where it is normal, in all religions, that volunteers work for free or at any rate without entering into the contracts and relationships that are typical of salaried jobs.

A vicious circle has been created where PROTEX claims that volunteers and others who have voluntarily joined religious or spiritual movements PROTEX regards as “controversial” are “victims of trafficking” and thus the fact that they deny being victims is irrelevant.

In fact, PROTEX seems to have joined forces with “anti-cultists” who believe in the **pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing**, repudiated by courts of law in the United States and other democratic countries, according to which those who join “cults” are subject to mysterious persuasion techniques that put them in a situation of mental slavery.

Scholars of new religious movements have consistently denounced in the last forty years these theories as tools used to discriminate against unpopular spiritual minorities. Yet, PROTEX and other Argentinian institutions continue to promote them, raiding in a military style and prosecuting religious and spiritual groups whose members deny being victims and claim that they have joined their movements and perform volunteer work for them based on their own constitutionally protected freedom of choice. Prosecutors in Argentina continue to quote a discredited anti-cult literature, ignoring the mainline academic approach that has rejected the notions that “cults” are essentially different from “religions” as they use “brainwashing” as unprovable and non-scientific.

As typically happened in the case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS), women have been harassed by claiming that they were exploited to work for free for BAYS, including as prostitutes. They deny ever having been prostitutes or exploited, but PROTEX’s argument is that the voice of the alleged victims of human trafficking and brainwashing is by definition irrelevant. These women, most of them professionals in their 40s or 50s, are thus truly victimized—by PROTEX. In other cases, esteemed religion-based international humanitarian organizations such as REMAR, which are based on volunteer work, have been raided claiming that, since volunteers do not receive a regular salary, they are also victims of human trafficking.

Clearly, legitimate provisions against real human trafficking are being misused to discriminate against religious and spiritual minorities that their opponents label as “cults” and accuse of the imaginary crime of “brainwashing,” as a sort of barely modernized version of the old accusations of witchcraft or controlling victims through the evil eye.

These violations of human rights and FoRB are against Argentina’s international obligations and should cease immediately. The international provisions on FoRB do not distinguish between “good” religions and “bad” “cults,” and ask that all religious and spiritual groups, popular or unpopular, be equally respected and allowed to operate freely according to their own doctrines and principles.

Bitter Winter, a daily magazine on freedom of religion and human rights

CAP-LC – Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

EIFRF – European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

Fedinsieme [Faiths Together]

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Conscience
OPR – Observatory of Religious Pluralism
ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees
Soteria International

Hate speech and intolerance: the case of a philosophical yoga school (II)

The US Annual State Department Report on Religious Freedom around the world and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should grant more attention to anti-religious hate speech in Argentina. [See Article I HERE.](#)

[Spanish version](#)

This article was originally published by [Bitter Winter](#) under the title "Anti-Cult Repression in Argentina 2. PROTEX and Pablo Salum" (18 August 2023)

It is time for the U.S. Department of State, USCIRF, and other international institutions to condemn human rights and freedom of religion abuses by PROTEX.

by Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



*Photo: Armed SWAT team police led by PROTEX, a state agency dealing with human trafficking, labor and sex exploitation, abusively raiding Buenos Aires Yoga School
(Credit: Bitter Winter)*

HRWF (19.08.2023) - In the [first article](#) of this series, I discussed the cooperation between the special anti-trafficking Argentinian agency PROTEX and the professional anti-cultist Pablo Salum.

The latter's favorite technique is to interview and weaponize so-called "survivors" and victims of any religious or belief community, that he labels with the magic repulsive word

“cult,” and to publicize their—unverified—declarations on YouTube and social media. These disgruntled former members are supposed to reflect the hidden, true horrible face of various religious or belief groups, including inside mainline religions. The style is tabloid and populist. The objective is to be a source of breaking news, create the buzz and draw attention to his own person.

Anybody wanting to settle scores with a religious or belief movement he or she had problems with, directly or indirectly, is welcome on the YouTube channel of Salum, as it was also the case with [a former member of the Soka Gakkai](#), a Japanese Buddhist movement.

Pablo Salum also directed PROTEX to attack the Christian lay movement “Cómo vivir por fe” (How to Live by Faith), the Argentinian branch of the Australian new religious movement “Jesus Christians” making a vow of poverty. The manipulation by Salum of a former member raising the specter of forced organ donation was denounced by the Argentinian judge who found no crime in the case, as [Bitter Winter](#) found out after some serious investigation.



Argentinian members of “Cómo vivir por fe.” They successfully resisted Pablo Salum’s and PROTEX’s false accusations. (Credit: Bitter Winter)

In July last, PROTEX [raided 38 centers](#) of the well-known Evangelical NGO REMAR. Pablo Salum [boasts](#), rightly or not, that he was “involved” in the operation but what is sure is that this crackdown in Argentina created a scandal in the Evangelical community internationally. [REMAR](#) is indeed a respected NGO specialized in the rehabilitation of drug addicts and (paradoxically) women victims of real trafficking. In several countries REMAR cooperates with the government. In Argentina, PROTEX claims that what they do is “trafficking”...

The harmful influence of Pablo Salum on religious tolerance in Argentina should not be underestimated.

On 1 August, a “collective of organizations and individuals fighting for the eradication of human trafficking in Argentina,” the “Stop Human Trafficking Network” (Red Alto al Tráfico y la Trata – RATT), organized and transmitted on the Senate’s TV channel a conference titled “Cults and Human Trafficking” (“Sectas y trata de personas”) which is now available on YouTube. The conference was held in a room of the Senate and there were approximately 100 people in the audience, plus the people watching the TV channel. The speakers were the senator who hosted the event, Dr. Daniel Bensusán; the authorities of the RATT, Viviana Caminos and Nancy Rodriguez; both the former (Zaida Gatti) and the new (Norma Mazzeo) coordinators of the “National Program for the Rescue and Accompaniment of Victims Affected by the Crime of Trafficking in Persons”; a lawyer sponsoring victims of human trafficking, Dr. Sebastian Sal; a “survivor” of the Opus Dei and, closing the conference, Pablo Salum.

Salum’s destructive role in the PROTEX operation against the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS)

On 12 August 2022, [PROTEX](#) worked in tandem with police SWAT teams and with Pablo Salum when it launched a military-style police raid on the BAYS members-owned building, starting with the cafe on the ground floor.

Carlos Barragán, a professional stage magician, who was arrested and detained for about three months until all the charges against him were suddenly dropped, [explained](#) in an interview in Buenos Aires with Susan Palmer, an Affiliate Professor in the Religions and Cultures Department at Concordia University in Montreal (Canada) and director of the Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control project at McGill University (Canada), supported by the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC): “Pablo Salum had told PROTEX that I had in my house—in my ‘bunker’ (as Salum calls it)—all the blackmail material for the extortion of rich men who were offered our women. He said videos of sex acts were taken so that we could extort money from them. So, the police smashed their way into my house and stole over 4,000 VHS, expecting to find blackmail material, but of course all they found were my historic collection of magic shows, and the VHS series on our philosophy classes in BAYS.”

This incident has destroyed the magician’s whole career. “Lie, lie and there will always be something left,” according to the saying.



As self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner, Salum has already decided that the BAYS leader should go to jail. From Twitter.

Five women older than 50 years, three in their forties and one in mid-thirties were surprisingly said by the state agency PROTEX to have been victims of sexual exploitation by BAYS. The nine women vividly denied they had ever been prostitutes and exploited as such by BAYS. They are currently trying to sue the two PROTEX prosecutors in charge of the case.

A false victim (45 years) of alleged sexual exploitation, from a Jewish family, graduated from university with a MBA and who has been working for years in his father's TV production company, told [Susan Palmer](#): "Pablo Salum posted photographs of me and my dad and some of our employees at the TV station on Twitter. One woman resigned because she feared her image would be tainted working with us. My boyfriend, he lost his job in the real estate company, and he is now trying to rebuild his career. He started a new realtor business, he has a degree in this field. The mother of my boyfriend was one of those accused of human trafficking."

The fabricated accusations also ruined the professional activities of other false victims and in several cases disturbed their relations with their partners.

US human rights reports and Argentina

Yet, it seems that the Argentinian authorities prioritize the instrumentalization of the BAYS case to endorse the dangerous brainwashing pseudoscience theory rejected by the academic world.

Argentina has the best ranking of the [2023 US Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) and an institution like PROTEX is undoubtedly necessary to combat labor trafficking and sexual exploitation. Yet, it is difficult to understand why the Argentinian authorities, and PROTEX in particular, go on using as a source an anti-cult activist who is now known for using defamatory hate speech against a wide range of religious and belief

groups, spreading fake information and all sorts of lies about them with dramatic consequences for his victims.

The US also has other state mechanisms monitoring the harmful activities of anti-cult activists, such as the Department of State and USCIRF (US Commission on International Religious Freedom).

On 24 July 2023, USCIRF published a report titled "[Religious Freedom Concerns about Religious Freedom in the European Union](#)" in which a section was devoted to the anti-cult issue and was stressing that "Several governments in the EU have supported or facilitated the propagation of harmful information about certain religious groups." This is also the case with Argentina.

BAYS, as a philosophical belief system, can legitimately claim that it should be protected by [Article 18 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) on freedom of religion or belief.

The US Annual State Department Report on Religious Freedom around the world and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should grant more attention to anti-religious hate speech in Argentina. Both the US Department of State and USCIRF are in the best position to warn PROTEX against their questionable implementation of the national [Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims](#) and the creation of false victims, such as in the BAYS case.

***Academic articles on the BAYS case:**

By Susan Palmer: "[From Cults to 'Cobayes': New Religions as 'Guinea Pigs' for Testing New Laws. The Case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School.](#)"

By Massimo Introvigne: "[The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School.](#)"

Hate speech and intolerance: the case of a philosophical yoga school (I)

The US Annual State Department Report on Religious Freedom around the world and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should grant more attention to anti-religious hate speech in Argentina

[Spanish version](#)

This article was originally published by [Bitter Winter](#) under the title "Anti-Cult Repression in Argentina 1. PROTEX and Pablo Salum" (17 August 2023)

A special agency against human trafficking cooperates with a bizarre anti-cult activist who regards even the Catholic Carmelite nuns as a "cult."

by Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



(Credit. Bitter Winter)

HRWF (18.08.2023) - On 12 August 2022, in the evening, about sixty people in their sixties were attending a quiet philosophy class in a coffee shop located on the ground-floor of a ten-floor building in the State of Israel Avenue, in a middle-class district of Buenos Aires when suddenly all hell broke loose.

Fully armed SWAT team police led by [PROTEX](#)—a state agency dealing with human trafficking, labor and sex exploitation of persons—broke the door of the meeting place and by force entered the building which was the seat of a yoga school, 25 private apartments and professional offices of a number of its members. They went up to all the premises and without knocking or ringing the bells, they violently opened all the doors by force, seriously damaging them.

According to a complaint by a person whose name was not officially disclosed, the founder of the [Buenos Aires Yoga School \(BAYS\)](#) recruited people through deceit in order to reduce them to a situation of servitude and/or sexual exploitation. The plaintiff chose afterwards to reveal his name and to boast about its initiative on his YouTube channel, his social media, and media in general: Pablo Gaston Salum.

In 2023, several scholars in religious studies were invited to Argentina to attend [a panel in an international human rights event](#) co-organized by the government and UNESCO. They took this opportunity to study the BAYS case.

Human Rights Without Frontiers also investigated this issue and already published three articles: [A yoga school in the eye of a media cyclone and police abuse – Nine women sue a state institution abusively calling them victims of sexual abuse – Happy 85th Birthday, Mr Percowicz.](#)

Who is Pablo Salum?

Pablo Gaston Salum, born in 1978, had a hectic schooling and life. In 1990 and 1991, while he was living with his mother, a BAYS follower, he stopped attending his classes and had to repeat the 6th grade of his elementary school. In 1992, after (according to her report) beating his mother, he was taken in by his father. He was then 14 years old and his elementary school was still not finished. One year later, he quarreled with his stepmother and went to live at a friend's family but at their own expense. After some time, they asked him to leave.

In 1995, he went back to the home of his father who after some time and some more quarrels declared him a runaway to the police. In the meantime, he tried to continue his studies in a secondary school but dropped out again. He went back again to his mother's and continued his turbulent life with his parents.

In 1996, as he did not want to study any more or to work and was violent with his mother, his older brother German Javier, a former but not disgruntled follower of BAYS, took him at home. Despite his new human environment, his violence did not diminish and his brother German with another person filed a complaint against him for death threats. He was then detained by the police for two days. And Pablo Salum resumed his nomadic life, staying then with his stepfather Carlos Mannina, a former but not disgruntled BAYS member, already separated from his mother years before.

In the meantime, his brother had a successful professional life as the director of a real estate agency in Buenos Aires, and his sister has been working abroad for more than ten years as a nurse after having studied in the US.

The fantasies and the lies of Pablo Salum

Pablo Salum claims on his [Instagram](#) profile Pablogsalum to have founded the Freeminds Network (Red Librementes), a de facto association which is not known to be officially registered as a civic association. He also presents himself as a human rights activist and "the [creator of the law](#) of assistance to victims and relatives of coercive cults."

The website [Celeknow.com](#), which among other miscellaneous topics publishes gossips about a wide range of personalities in the spotlight, presents him as "a worker fighting for human and animal rights," as well as "a social worker" and "an activist fighting against coercive cults."

Nothing indicates that he has the profile of a human rights defender and no other professional website than his does.

Boasting on social media of alleged achievements such as "the creation of a law against cults" looks more like megalomania than a reality. Pablo Salum is not a lawmaker elected by the Argentinian people. Modesty is one of the main characteristics of a human rights defender. He does not have that quality. He constantly disguises reality and openly lies about his family life in order to present himself as a victim, a survivor of something fictitious, and an anticult crusader as this provides him opportunities to be interviewed by the media.

Pablo Salum is just a blogger and an influencer who wants to be in the spotlight as it can also be seen on his videos. The Argentinian authorities prosecuting BAYS on the basis of his declarations should reconsider the reliability and the relevance of their source of information in this regard.

Pablo Salum claims to have left the so-called "BAYS cult" at the age of 14, to which his mother and his older brother and sister belonged and are still allegedly under its grip. In the Argentinian media and in his own videos, he claims to be a "survivor," to have lost track of his family—his mother, brother and sister—while weeping with a deceptive pathos over his lack of contact with them. He even goes so far as to declare that they have been "kidnapped" by the "cult." For sure he is a good comedian.

The reality is very different and it is surprising that most Argentinian journalists do not bother to do the slightest verification about what he says and claims to be. A 15-minute [video](#) prepared and supplied to "Bitter Winter" by BAYS members (not involved in the investigation), ex-members and relatives, reveals irrefutable evidence of Pablo Salum's fabrications and silenced disturbing facts about his conflictual relations with his family.

Pablo Salum's mother has never changed her address since her son left. As for his brother German and his sister Andrea, all you had to do to get in touch with them was to google their names. Pablo Salum's declarations about them are just all lies.

Salum siding with China's dictatorship against persecuted religious minorities

In the area of freedom of religion or belief, Pablo Salum is certainly not a human rights activist. As a free thinker, he is even hostile to such a freedom.

In May 2022, he took sides with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against Falun Gong practitioners [tweeting](#) "Remember that Falun Dafa is a dangerous coercive organization #Secta of Chinese origin that is operating in Argentina and other countries WITH IMPUNITY as seen in this [photo](#). It would be good if you alert the public." Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have largely documented the cases of illegal detention and forced organ harvesting of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners by the Chinese government. Salum has taken an opposite direction.

In [a recent incident involving the Dalai Lama and a young boy](#), Salum used the opportunity to [call His Holiness](#) "this criminal who wants to be called Dalai Lama." He called the [Tibetan Buddhism](#) he leads "a cult involved in human trafficking and pedophilia," and [Buddhism in general](#) as a religion hiding "obscure coercive doctrines" typical of "cults."

Salum's hate speeches

According to Salum, the Mormon Church is a [coercive cult](#) which covers up [sexual abuses](#). As to Jehovah's Witnesses, he considers their movement "a [terrorist organization](#)," which is worse than Putin's accusation of "extremist organization." Noteworthy is the number of [Jehovah's Witnesses detained for years in Russia](#), including Crimea, for practicing their faith in private, more than 130. [Adventists](#) and even [Catholic Carmelites](#) are also targeted by Salum. Even [Freemasonry](#) is qualified by him as extremely dangerous in Mexico.

***Academic articles on the BAYS case:**

By Susan Palmer: "From Cults to 'Cobayes': New Religions as 'Guinea Pigs' for Testing New Laws. The Case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School."

By Massimo Introvigne: "The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School."



Even Freemasonry is regarded as a "coercive cult" by Salum. From Twitter.



The Catholic Discalced Carmelites nuns are a "cult" "trafficking" their victims according to Pablo Salum. From Twitter.



The Latter-day Saints (Mormons) "cover-up for pedophiles" and "treat women as objects" according to Salum. From Twitter.

Happy 85th birthday, Mr Percowicz

On 12 August 2022, Juan Percowicz was arrested and abusively detained along with 18 other people on charges that remain unproven one year later

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (29.06.2023) - Today, on 29 June, Juan Percowicz, the founder of the Yoga School of Buenos Aires (BAYS), is 85 years old. Last year, six weeks after his birthday, he was arrested with 18 other people of his yoga school and detained for 18 days in a cell with nine other prisoners in inhuman conditions. When he was released from the Argentinian prison hell, he was kept in home detention for 67 more days.

HRWF has recently interviewed Juan Percowicz who during his professional life was a certified public accountant and a licentiate in administration. In 1993, he was honored by the World Education Council for his labor as an educator.

One year after his ordeal, he remains innocent of the charges brought against him by a person whose name is still undisclosed: trafficking in women for sexual exploitation and money laundering. However, every one of the alleged victims has denied being such.

As in many other countries, including in the European Union and other democracies, there are serious abuses of custody and pretrial detention in inhumane conditions and for disproportionate periods. Argentina is no exception to the rule and Mr Percowicz was a victim of such abuses.

Arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions in Argentina is an issue that needs to be raised at the United Nations and in other international fora.

The raid of a fully armed police SWAT team

Q.: In which circumstances were you arrested in a [massive raid](#) targeting about 50 private homes?

Juan Percowicz: On 12 August 2022 I was resting in a house that I had rented to recover from the persistent after-effects of two years of confinement and immobility due to the COVID pandemic. I had almost stopped walking during that period. I was moving with great difficulty because of a stroke and only with a cane.

On that fateful evening I was lying on my bed when suddenly there was a deafening roar followed by many screams and threatening voices. I could hear people running around everywhere inside but I couldn't understand what was going on.

I was very scared because I was not used to getting visitors and even less so without warning. My first thought was that thieves had broken in.

I soon saw two of my people lying on the floor and people in uniform pointing long guns at them.

I could hear a lot of shouting and I began to distinguish some words "nobody moves, this is a raid".

Everything was confusing and above all violent, very violent.

I could not understand why we were treated like dangerous criminals. I never had anything to hide or anything to feel at fault for.

The first thing they did was to take us all to the living room, screaming and handcuffing us, ordering us not to talk to each other or they would separate us. There were five of us and more than 10 of them.

They read us our names and told us that after going through the whole house, which they did with a lot of violence, they would read us their search report.

We could not understand what was happening. Our lives depended on a group of men in uniform who were not willing to explain us immediately what was going on or what crime we were supposed to have committed. We had to make a lot of efforts to remain quiet without protesting.

The raid, the shouting and the threats lasted for about 15 hours throughout the night.

They searched the whole house. They took all the electronic devices, computers, silver coins from a collection, all the personal papers they found, personal diaries and notebooks and all the money we had, even what we had in our wallets and many other things.

They told us that the procedure was being carried out in about 50 places at the same time, including my home. This made me even more afraid because it was so disproportionate and incomprehensible.

I could not rest all night because of the procedure and the threats.

On the next day at noon we were transferred to the police station.

The interrogation

Q.: How did the transfer occur?

Juan Percowicz: On the trip I got sick and vomited several times.

When they took us out of the house, they took pictures of us handcuffed in front of a poster. They filmed us as we left and all the pictures were soon published in the press saying that they had disbanded "a cult of horror" and imprisoned the leader.

They told us that they were detaining us to take our data and then they would release us. However, after many hours spent in the police station where they took our fingerprints several times and asked us several times for our personal data, they told us that we were going to be detained.

Those who were arrested with me desperately tried to call the policemen to reason. They told the guards that my life was in great danger if I did not get the medical care and the medication I needed and insisted that they should consider my age, my state of health and my pathologies, but in vain.

The officers were constantly whispering with pride among themselves about the great catch they had made.

The detention

HRWF: How were your detention conditions?

Juan Percowicz: I was taken along with nine companions to a deep, dark and damp basement.

They lowered me down in a dirty wheelchair that we managed to get but I could fall at any time and get seriously injured while going down a steep staircase.

They took my cane and my belongings. I had brought my blood pressure monitor and a glucose measuring device because I am diabetic. They took them from me when they stripped me of my clothes to control my health.

I was very cold, hungry and thirsty.

I was then led down some dark, gloomy, faded and dirty barred corridors to the basement.

Along with the growing confusion and bewilderment, it seemed that the spaces were shrinking and becoming more and more gloomy and threatening.

We tried to encourage each other, but inside we had a feeling of total insecurity and helplessness.

We arrived at a space measuring approximately 5 x 4 m, dark, windowless, very humid, inhospitable, with bars separating it from the corridor. I understood that it was our cell. The floor was entirely covered by the mattresses on which we were to sleep. They were absolutely broken, stripped and dangerously dirty. In a corner there was a hole in the floor to be used as a toilet and a sink without any water.

I could never have imagined in my life that one day I would live for 18 days in such conditions.

I can hardly walk, as I said, and I had to sleep on the floor but I was very grateful to be with companions who could help me to move at any time. Alone, I would never have managed it. There was no decent bathroom or water nearby.

We still did not understand what was happening and why we were prisoners. We had no answers and nothing made sense. There was nothing to justify our deprivation of freedom in such awful conditions.

On the next day our comrades who were free managed to bring us some food and some protection against the cold and the humidity.

I was also worried about the health and well-being of those who were with me. Some of them had some pathologies and needed specific care.

At the court

Q.: When were you taken to court and how was the media coverage?

Juan Percowicz: Three days after the raid, I was taken in a wheelchair to the court in Comodoro Py to testify. When we were leaving the police station, they made us get in and out of the truck twice because the person filming the transfer did not get the filming right. I was taken handcuffed in a transport truck.

In Comodoro Py the magistrates read some illogical and unintelligible accusations, which corresponded more to a fantastic novel than to reality.

Once again, when I got off, media people were filming. My photo was in the news all the time with the most infamous and lying stories. Every time there was a transfer people were filming us: the media and the police. I was repeatedly presented in the media as a corrupt, diabolical and dangerous person, without any reason or evidence of any kind to support such a hypothesis. My reputation was shattered and soiled, damaged forever.

Inhumane detention conditions for 18 days

Q.: How was the daily life in detention?

Juan Percowicz: There were three guard shifts.

The guard who arrived in the morning at about 5:30-6:00 would take a head count to make sure we were all there.

I will never forget the noise of the keys opening bars and moving irons and padlocks. Every morning I was wondering for how many more days the whole nightmare would go on.

During the night I was trying to rest but I had to get up many times to urinate, and in those deplorable conditions much more than usual.

We had breakfast thanks to the things that our companions brought us from outside.

Every time I moved, I needed the help of three of them to get up and move around, because as time went on my body became more and more numb.

Once the comrades tried to pour water with a bucket over the sink that did not work, but the drain was broken and the water came out on the floor of the cell and the mattresses got wet.

Our cell could only get some light from a low intensity bulb in the entrance corridor, too far away to be efficient

We did not know if it was night or day. Our only landmark was the changing of the guard.

One day the sewage drain in the latrines was clogged and dirty water began to come out through a drain a few meters away. We had to lift our mattresses so that they would not get wet with the infected water. Some of our colleagues unclogged the pipes with a tape but had to endure grabbing and splashing fecal matter in order to keep us from being flooded with shit. All this took place in the dark.

Everyone was very worried about me and I was worried about them. The situation was desperately incomprehensible to everyone. The days went by and nothing was changing. I did not know how or when it would end.

Back home with an electronic anklet and a trauma

Q.: How was your life when you were under home arrest?

Juan Percowicz: Eighteen days after my detention I was transferred to my home to continue my captivity in house arrest with an electronic anklet.

In the meantime, my health had seriously deteriorated, my body was numb, my legs were swollen and I was almost almost unable to walk. I was physically very weak.

I could not leave the apartment at all. A policeman came in the morning and another one at night to check me and my anklet. I also could not have any contact with the outside world. That lasted for 67 days.

To this day I have had nightmares of persecution. Sometimes I try to watch some news or programs about the raid and the judicial procedures broadcast during my incarceration but it is too painful. I am still deeply hurt by the determination of some to destroy us and by the malice of an infamous press.

I am deeply grateful to God for having kept me alive in such adverse moments and in the company of friends who protected and defended me at every step.

More reading

[A yoga school in the eye of a media cyclone](#)

[Nine women sue a state institution abusively calling them "victims of sexual abuse"](#)

[The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School 1. Raiding an Old Ladies' Cafe](#)

[The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School. 2. An Accountant-Philosopher and His Friends](#)

[The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School. 3. An Eclectic Teaching](#)

[The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School. 4. The Most Dangerous Cult of Them All](#)

Nine women sue a state institution abusively calling them 'victims of sexual abuse'

A controversial law leading to prosecutors' abuses of authority and a fabricated case against a yoga school

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (23.06.2023) - Five women older than 50, three in their forties and one in mid-thirties are suing on appeal two prosecutors of the state agency PROTEX on unfounded claims of their being victims of sexual abuse in the framework of a yoga school. Their complaint had previously been turned down by a court of first instance.

Beyond this case, it is obviously the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) that is targeted. According to a complaint by a person whose name was not disclosed, the founder of the BAYS recruited people through deceit in order to reduce them to a situation of servitude and/or sexual exploitation. The purpose was allegedly to put in place an illegal business structure in Argentina and the United States under the umbrella of a cult-like yoga group for the laundering of funds obtained as a result of their activities.

The lawyers of the nine women consider it is a new attempt made by the same anti-BAYS activist 30 years ago who unsuccessfully lodged a similar complaint against the yoga school and its leadership. The charges were then declared unfounded and the accused were all cleared.

In the aftermath of the adoption of the law on the prevention and punishment of human trafficking ([Law No 26.842](#)), PROTEX started to misuse two concepts introduced in amendments in December 2012: the promotion of prostitution without coercion (Article 21), which is a crime, and the ambiguous idea of vulnerability (Articles 22, 23 and 26) as a form of coercion. On the one hand, the purpose of PROTEX is the instrumentalization of the BAYS case to increase its statistics and give an image of growing efficiency, which will allow it to demand a bigger budget. On the other hand, the accuser's objective is to try to destroy the BAYS on personal grounds.

A hurdle race for access to justice on appeal

It has been a hurdle race for the female plaintiffs to have access to the appeal procedure. The complaint was first rejected by the judge for non-existence of a crime committed by the PROTEX prosecutors. The nine women were refused to be considered plaintiffs but their lawyers insisted, basing their arguments on two legal provisions:

Art. 82 of the Code of Criminal Procedure – *"Any person with civil capacity particularly offended by a crime of public action shall have the right to become a plaintiff and as such to promote the process, provide elements of conviction, argue about them and appeal with the scope established in this Code"*.

Art. 5 of the Victim Law – *"The victim shall have the following rights: h) To intervene as plaintiff or civil plaintiff in the criminal proceeding, in accordance with the constitutional guarantee of due process and the local procedural laws"*.

As of mid-June, the case is pending.

Some accusations against the PROTEX prosecutors

According to the lawyers of the plaintiffs, the PROTEX prosecutors have reportedly failed to denounce certain criminal acts that have occurred during the raids carried out by fully armed SWAT team police in the BAYS building in August 2022: robbery of items not mentioned in the search records, mistreatment, harassment, threats and damages to the residents' properties by the personnel in charge of the search. The victims of facts stated that prosecutors Mángano and Colombo, in spite of being aware of the facts denounced, omitted to report them.

During the investigation and court proceedings, the right to privacy of the nine female plaintiffs was outrageously violated as their names were disclosed by PROTEX to all the people handling the file and even to the press. The media and social media published some of them with the socially negative connotation of prostitution but there is worse.

Interviews between one of the plaintiffs and a psychologist of PROTEX victims' assistance program conducted in an isolated environment that the prosecutors and lawyers watched without being seen – the Gesell Chamber* procedure - finally happened to be streamed in a TV show! On the one hand, the confidentiality of such a procedure is the responsibility of PROTEX and on the other hand, it is absolutely illegal to stream such interviews on TV, all the more so since the nine women had explicitly asked their identity not to be disclosed.

Moreover, the prosecutors are also said to have disproportionately abused their power by extending the investigation on the plaintiffs to the international sphere, as cooperation was requested abroad to collect bank and financial data and information on the assets that the plaintiffs might have had in Uruguay and the United States. This resulted for three plaintiffs in the denial of access to the territory of the United States.

Not credible claims of sexual abuse

While prostitution is not illegal in Argentina, exploiting prostitution is criminalized. However, the plaintiffs strongly deny having been involved in prostitution.

[PROTEX](#) recognized in a workshop in 2017 that most victims of sexual abuse are young women who have rarely completed primary education and have no or hardly any livelihoods. In addition, it asserted that 98% of the seven thousand victims assisted by PROTEX did not consider themselves victims although they were.

In the current case of the nine female yoga practitioners, they are educated and have means of existence coming from their professional activities as teachers, artists, real estate agents or company managers. They do not have the profile of the victims assisted by PROTEX and the statistics of the state agency are not an argument to forcefully put the 'victim label' on them.

During the procedure, the plaintiffs declared that PROTEX considered them in a false and arbitrary manner as victims of a coercive cult-like organization allegedly "brainwashing" and abusing the vulnerability of its female followers (Source: Judge Ariel Lijo's dismissal of the complaint in May 2023).

The term "cult" that was extensively used by the media to characterize the BAYS is not a valid category but a label used to slander unpopular minorities. As to the concept of "brainwashing", it is a pseudo-scientific theory weaponized for the same purpose and it is rejected by serious scholars on religious issues.

The plaintiffs consider that they were not in a "cult" and were not "brainwashed".

The expansion of the PROTEX controversial theory of the enforced status of victim

In the aftermath of the adoption of Law 26.842, PROTEX intensified its training program of "Workshops on Gender Perspective and Trafficking in Persons for Sexual Exploitation" launched in 2011 and started diffusing the idea that victims of prostitution rings were not any more able to think freely and to choose because if they could, they would make other choices. The new controversial philosophy of PROTEX is to rethink prostitution in the light of vulnerability.

In that year, Assistant Prosecutor Marysa S. Tarantino attended the Training Program organized by the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation - through its Women's Office - and the Attorney General's Office - through the then called UFASE (an anti-trafficking prosecutor unit nowadays turned into the Attorney General's Office under the name PROTEX). She shared her critical thoughts about PROTEX philosophy in a 13-page paper titled "*La madre de Ernesto es puro cuento/ Una primera crítica a los materiales pedagógicos de la PROTEX*" and published in [Revista de Derecho Penal y Procesal Penal, Nr. 3/ 2018](#), Buenos Aires, Abeledo Perrot. I extract a few of the author's ideas hereafter.

The Program was designed jointly by the two agencies to be given to officials and employees of the National Judicial Branch and the National Public Prosecutor's Office. Its purpose was to train legal operators (especially judges, prosecutors and other legal officials) so that they could acquire "the" gender perspective necessary to deal with cases of trafficking in persons, with special emphasis on cases of sexual exploitation.

Once the participants successfully completed the course, they could become trainers and disseminate their new knowledge and sensitivities in their different territorial jurisdictions, throughout the country. The objective was to create a snowball effect: the expansion of the theory that people can be qualified by PROTEX as victims without their consent and even against their will. This dangerous trend observed in Argentina may inspire other countries and urgently needs to be publicly questioned and debated not only in the country itself but also on a global level.

Concerning the experience of the nine female yoga practitioners at BAYS, their case has obviously been fabricated at various levels to make it a case of prostitution exploitation to be dealt with by PROTEX with the aim of feeding an indictment against the BAYS.

A yoga school in the eye of a media cyclone

A case of abuse of power by prosecutors and the police

[Spanish version](#)

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (08.06.2023) – Since last summer, the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) has been pilloried by Argentinian media outlets which have published over 370 news and articles vilifying the school for allegedly trafficking in people for sexual exploitation.

The reality of a big show staged by a prosecutor on the basis of false testimonies from a former disgruntled member of the BAYS is now emerging from serious investigation recently carried out on the spot by foreign scholars. One of them, Massimo Introvigne, the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars studying new religious movements, has just published [a thirty-page report](#) about the BAYS saga.

[Human Rights Without Frontiers](#) (HRWF), a Brussels-based NGO in the heart of the European Union district, which defends press freedom but is also known to debunk biased and fake news, has also started its investigation from a human rights perspective.

The 12 August 2022 police crackdown

On 12 August 2022, in the evening, about sixty people in their sixties were attending a quiet philosophy class in a coffee shop located on the ground-floor of a ten-floor building in the State of Israel Avenue, in a middle-class district of Buenos Aires when suddenly all hell broke loose.

Fully armed SWAT team police broke the door of the meeting place and by force entered the building which was the seat of the yoga school, 25 private apartments and professional offices of a number of its members. They went up to all the premises and without knocking or ringing the bells, they violently opened all the doors by force, seriously damaging them. Some residents running after them tried to give them the keys so that they could enter without destroying the entryways but their offer was ignored.

The purpose was obvious: the police wanted to film every part of the operation that was 'useful' to justify the crackdown ordered by the prosecutor of [PROTEX](#), a state agency dealing with human trafficking, labor and sex exploitation of persons.

For six-seven hours, they searched all the premises, putting everything upside down. When the police left, almost all residents complained that money, jewels and other items such as cameras and printers were missing but were not mentioned in the search records. As the victims of the raid were never interviewed by the media, the various excesses committed by the police were not publicly reported.

Outside, reporters were taking pictures of the handcuffed people dragged one by one out of the building. It can be assumed that the prosecutor's office had leaked some information to a few journalists about the raid some time before taking place.

A one-sided video with a statement of the prosecutor carefully staged was quickly leaked and uploaded on YouTube.

Similar needlessly violent raids were carried out in about 50 places around the capital city during all the night.

The media in Argentina labeled the yoga school BAYS "la secta del horror" or "the horror cult" that had allegedly been operating an international prostitution ring for 30 years. In fact, in 1993, the stepfather of a female BAYS member lodged a complaint against Juan Percowicz, the founder of the yoga school, and other people managing the school. He was accusing them of operating a prostitution ring to finance the BAYS but what the media failed to check and to say is that all the defendants had been declared not guilty of all the charges in 2000.

In 2021, war was once more waged against the BAYS and its leadership with the same sort of complaint and accusations as 30 years ago although they had already been judged and declared unfounded.

Accused, arrested and detained

All in all, arrest warrants were issued against 19 persons, 12 men and 7 women. They were all imprisoned and submitted to a very harsh jail regime.

Twelve persons spent 85 days in prison from 12 August to 4 November 2022. In two cases, the Court of Appeals revoked the indictment for being unfounded.

Three others were detained during the same period of time but under two different regimes. After about 20 days behind bars, they were placed under home detention. Among them, Juan Percowicz (84) spent 18 days in prison sharing a cell with nine other prisoners, and 67 days in home detention.

Four defendants were released after 28 days of detention.

On 4 November 2022, the Court of Appeal freed all the remaining defendants from jail. In the meantime, their businesses had either been closed by the authorities or cannot function any more because of the negative media publicity. Almost all of them are now jobless.

Two judges of the Appeal Court still believed there was evidence justifying going on with the case against 17 defendants. Another judge wrote in partial dissent that the court should also have considered whether the case should not have been simply dismissed.

About the legislation

The arrested persons were accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and money laundering on the basis of [Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims](#) which on 19 December 2012 amended Law No 26.364 dealing until then with this sort of issue.

Argentina does not criminalize prostitution but it criminalizes the behavior of those who economically benefit from the sexual activity of another person.

A new tougher law, adopted in 2012 under international and domestic pressures, has provisions about victims of human trafficking which are questionable and questioned by legal experts with regards to the norms of international conventions. For example, Law 26.842 puts in the category of victims prostitutes working in prostitution rings, although they deny their condition of victims, but are qualified as such, against their will, by PROTEX.

That controversial law along with its implementation was criticized by assistant prosecutor Marisa S. Tarantino in a book she published in 2021 under the title "*Ni víctimas ni criminales: trabajadores sexuales. Una crítica feminista a las políticas contra la trata de personas y la prostitución*" / *Neither victims nor criminals: sex workers. A feminist critique of anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution policies*. (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina).

About the case of nine BAYS female members

In the BAYS case, nine female members of the yoga school lodged a complaint against two prosecutors of PROTEX for abusing their power and naming them victims of sexual exploitation by the BAYS, which they strongly deny.

During his investigation in Argentina in March 2023, Massimo Introvigne, the aforementioned founder and managing director of CESNUR, met some of them and wrote in his [report](#) "The alleged 'victims' or 'possible victims' I met or interviewed showed no signs of having been exploited."

Moreover, it would be ridiculous to consider this group of women as a gang of prostitutes exploited by the BAYS when you see their profile:

- a 66-year-old social psychologist and professional singer;
- a 62-year-old visual arts teacher and painter;
- a 57-year-old actress, member of the 1997 world champion stage magic team;
- a 57-year-old elementary school teacher and philosophical business coach;
- a 50-year-old woman who was already considered a "victim" and was subjected to an expert opinion in the previous case, which proved that she was neither a victim nor exploited;
- a 45-year-old management graduate;
- a 43-year-old real estate agent;
- a 41-year-old digital marketing professional;
- a 35-year-old real estate agent, macromedia designer, and web designer.

If there are no prostitutes, there is no case and no sexual exploitation. If it was discovered that one or more BAYS members happened to trade sex for money, it would still be necessary to prove that it was based on coercion by BAYS leaders, which the judges recognized there was not in BAYS.

The whole issue looks like a fabricated case targeting the BAYS and the judicial system should easily establish justice but will it?

According to [PROTEX records](#), 98% of the female victims supposedly rescued by them claim not to be victims. Many of them can therefore be considered fabricated cases and there is a reason for this: Special Prosecutor's office gets a bigger budget and more power as it prosecutes more people.

The complaint of the nine ladies has been turned down by a court of first instance and an appeal court will soon examine it. Let us wait and see.

Article in Spanish:

<https://www.europeantimes.news/es/2023/06/argentina-yoga-school-media/#gsc.tab=0>
<https://europahoy.news/2023/06/argentina-una-escuela-de-yoga-en-el-ojo-de-un-ciclon-mediatico/>

Human rights abuses against Buenos Aires Yoga School denounced at the United Nations

At the 53th session of the UN Human Rights Council the UN ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-LC filed a written statement on the abusive activities of the anti-trafficking agency PROTEX targeting BAYS and other spiritual minorities.

by Thierry Valle

Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 May 2023]

Human Rights Abuses Against Members of the Buenos Aires Yoga School

The Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) was established in 1983 by Dr. Juan Percowicz to teach Raja Yoga, Western and Eastern philosophy, and their practical applications to improve personal well-being and daily life (information on BAYS and its case are taken by the only scholarly study of the group published in a peer-reviewed journal: Massimo Introvigne, "The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School," The Journal of CESNUR, 7.3, 2023, 3–32; parts of this study are reproduced here with permission).

By the early 1990s, it had achieved considerable success. When on June 5, 1992, Percowicz presented the school's philosophy in a lecture at the Sheraton Buenos Aires Hotel & Towers, the event had been declared of "national interest" and had received the official congratulations of the Ministry of Culture and Education, the City of Buenos Aires, and several other institutions. The school's musicians were gaining national and international recognition. Another student, Carlos Barragán, and his all-BAYS team were on their way to be acknowledged as the world champions of stage magic. Others had gained awards in the artistic, business, and medical fields.

As it often happens, success came together with envy, accusations by "anti-cultists" who do not tolerate unconventional thinking, and slander by a few parents dissatisfied with the fact that their sons or daughters had joined the BAYS. Unlike in other groups, where attacks come from a community of disgruntled "apostates," in the case of BAYS there was only one former member who attacked the school: one Pablo Salum, who had been with it as a young man and went on to become a "career anti-cultist," denouncing as "cults" the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Freemasons, the Seventh-day Adventists, and even the Catholic Discalced Carmelite nuns.

Based on the accusations of hostile relatives, later joined by Pablo Salum, in 1994 a prosecution was started against the BAYS, accused of operating a prostitution ring to finance itself. After a long investigation, in 2000 all BAYS defendants were found innocent of all charges. The judge commented that Salum's testimony was contradictory and reflected conflicts within his family more than the reality of the BAYS.

BAYS went on with its courses of philosophy and lived a quiet life until a special prosecutorial office called PROTEX (Procuraduría para el Combate de la Trata y Explotación de Personas, Office of the Procurator for Combating the Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons), some of whose leaders had started befriending Salum and listening to his anti-cult tirades, decided that it was in its best interest to expand its activities by considering the recruitment of members of religious groups stigmatized by their opponents as "cults" as a form of human trafficking.

In some cases, PROTEX was unsuccessful. For example, in the case of the Argentinian branch of the Australian Christian movement Jesus Christians, called "Cómo vivir por fe", a raid instigated by Pablo Salum resulted in a decision of November 28, 2022, where all defendants were found innocent. The court castigated Salum for having "coached" and

manipulated the main witness (see <https://bitterwinter.org/argentina-how-the-jesus-christians-defeated-pablo-salum-and-protex/>).

In the case of BAYS, since Salum kept accusing female members of the school (including his own sister) of working as prostitutes to finance the organization, the PROTEX believed it had a perfect case of trafficking, putting together “cults” and prostitution. Ignoring the fact that most of Salum’s accusations referred to old facts already judged in 2000, resulting in a double jeopardy, and that by 2022 most of the women he accused of being prostitutes were in their late forties, fifties, or sixties, PROTEX organized on August 12, 2022 a raid at a Buenos Aires building hosting a cafeteria where the BAYS lessons were offered and 25 private apartments of several students.

It was a militarized raid against BAYS students who were mostly middle-aged and elderly ladies. Fully armed SWAT team police broke the door and entered the coffee shop. A retired military man who was there recognized the weapons for what they were: loaded, with safety removed, and ready to shoot. In a few seconds, all hell broke loose. The police went up to all the apartments and started breaking all the doors, pursued in vain by their owners who offered the keys to the officers so that they could enter without destroying the entryways. Once inside, the police searched everywhere, gutting furniture and throwing all the content of the cabinets on the floors. When the agents left, with the media ready to take pictures of them outside the building, almost all owners complained that money and jewels had been stolen.

Similar scenes took place around Buenos Aires during all the night, in other private apartments of BAYS students, totaling 51 raids. In one of those apartments, a man was badly beaten by the police for no reason (it came out later they had mistaken him for somebody else). All in all, twenty persons were arrested (three of them at Buenos Aires airport before boarding a plane to the United States) and warrants for arrest were issued against another eight, four of whom were abroad.

The BAYS prisoners were submitted to a very harsh jail regime. Ten shared the same cell. Some of them were homosexuals and reported that they were insulted and intimidated by dangerous gang men who occupied a nearby cell.

Meanwhile, PROTEX and the judiciary interviewed the alleged “victims” who, according to Salum, had been persuaded by the BAYS to work as prostitutes. The youngest was a 36-year-old real estate agent, and their median age was 47. They included a 66-year-old social psychologist and a 62-year-old visual art teacher. They all emphatically denied being victims, having ever been prostitutes, or having been trafficked or manipulated by the BAYS. Salum and PROTEX answered by invoking the pseudo-scientific and discredited theory of brainwashing. The alleged “victims” had been brainwashed, they claimed, and as a consequence did not realize they were victims.

As they found no evidence of money coming from prostitution, they considered that the income of all the members came from such activity and that all the students’ businesses (a real estate agency, medical offices, an accounting firm, a law firm, a philosophical coaching company, etc.) were just a facade, ignoring the immense amount of accounting, banking and tax evidence (most of it collected in the raids) that proved that all their activities were true and legal. In this way they added “money laundering” to the charges without having analyzed even a single piece of evidence, thus affecting more students with criminal charges.

Given that Protex dictates courses and makes interventions in courts trying to install the idea of brainwashing and ignoring the advances of the last thirty years on the subject, it should not be surprising that the judge tries to support the position of these officials. Thus, to justify them he has accepted such eccentricities as the following:

- 1) To consider that Dale Carnegie's famous work "How to Win Friends and Influence People" is a brainwashing manual;
- 2) To maintain that BAYS held the alleged victims captive in apartments owned by them, and in which all of them continue to live peacefully at present;
- 3) Assert that a rest therapy administered by outside health professionals was used to "brainwash" the victims," although among its most frequent patients were the BAYS managers themselves.

On November 4, 2022, the Court of Appeal freed all defendants from jail. They went home, although they suffer from post-traumatic stress and can hardly sleep at night. Even students who were not arrested are still traumatized by the terror of the raids. Their businesses have either been closed by the authorities or cannot function because of the negative media publicity. They are almost all jobless.

While we understand that the judiciary is independent and courts of law will eventually rule on the BAYS case, CAP-LC notes the abusive acts of PROTEX that violated in many ways the human rights of the BAYS members, and cooperated in orchestrating a media slander campaign that made it impossible for them to continue with their normal activities and jobs. The cooperation by PROTEX with a questionable character such as Pablo Salum also raises serious doubts about its anti-cult and anti-BAYS biases. CAP-LC asks the Argentinian government to investigate the abusive actions of PROTEX and to fully protect the human rights and freedom of religion or belief of all BAYS members, both those who are defendants in the case and those who are falsely depicted as "victims."
