

Menem provokes military face-off

by Cynthia R. Rush

Argentine President Carlos Menem is facing economic, political, and social disaster. The International Monetary Fund policies he has imposed have left the economy in shambles; the base of the Peronist party has denied him political support, and almost all provincial governments are facing social upheaval and paralysis, due to budget crises. Unrest is rampant among every sector of the population, over a government policy which has slashed wages, reduced consumption, and destroyed production to please foreign creditors.

Everywhere Menem goes, he is booed. Tourists accosted him on the streets in Montevideo, Uruguay, to berate his economic policy. State sector workers in Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego, angry over their meager salaries, prevented him from speaking at a public event. Workers have shut down three provincial governments, demanding higher wages to confront monthly inflation of 15%. The CGT trade union federation has announced a national day of protest and mobilization for Nov. 15. Saúl Ubaldini, secretary general of one faction of the divided CGT, publicly characterized Menem's economic policy as "just like that of Martínez de Hoz," the monetarist finance minister who ruined Argentina's economy under the 1976-83 military junta.

Desperate to preserve his carefully cultivated image as the Bush administration's "reliable" ally, Menem has opted now to go on the offensive and provoke a confrontation with Army nationalists, led by Malvinas War hero Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín. He accuses them of planning to destabilize the nation, sow chaos and terrorism, or stage a coup. Colonel Seineldín is hated by the Anglo-American establishment because he has refused to surrender Argentine sovereignty or to dismantle the institution of the Armed Forces. When the generals of the Army high command complain that there is a breakdown in the chain of command, they are correct. Soldiers, as well as middle-level officers whose wages and livelihoods have been sacrificed as part of Menem's austerity program, feel more loyalty to Seineldín than to the high command.

It is no accident that Seineldín is being targeted. In the Middle East, the Anglo-American coalition led by George

Bush and Margaret Thatcher has just sacrificed the nation of Lebanon. They are gnashing their teeth over how to get their hands on Christian leader Gen. Michel Aoun, and have already murdered Lebanese statesman Dany Chamoun. Any national leader who refuses to succumb to their goals is to be eliminated. On Oct. 22, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Alberto Bonnet placed Seineldín under arrest for 60 days for violating Army discipline. This is expected to be the first of many punishments. Henry Kissinger and his local allies won't be satisfied, however, until Seineldín is dead.

Over a several-week period, a series of press and intelligence reports have placed Seineldín at the center of plans to stage a military uprising, allegedly to occur in conjunction with mobilizations organized by trade unionists and state sector workers around the country. On Oct. 3, to heighten the environment of conspiracy, the press lied that the colonel had gone underground. Ten days later, three non-commissioned officers at the Second Army Corps in Rosario were forcibly retired, charged with meeting privately with Seineldín sympathizers to view videos on the colonel's political thinking. Throughout this period, press also put out the story that Seineldín was protecting Panamanian Capt. Elicer Gaytán, former head of Gen. Manuel Noriega's security, who was allegedly hiding out in Buenos Aires. Seineldín was called to appear before General Bonnet to explain the video incident.

A dangerous strategy

Menem's strategy for dealing with his domestic crisis is suicidal. His commitment to IMF economic policy, combined with continued attacks on Army nationalists, is designed to put the latter group in an impossible situation in which anything could happen. Colonel Seineldín said as much in the letter he sent directly to Menem on Oct. 19. In it, he warned that as a result of actions taken against the Army, and the violation of previous agreements made to address problems inside the institution, "such is the sentiment prevailing among the majority of the ranks, that conditions are now ripe for rebellious events to occur of such gravity that neither you nor I can say precisely what may happen."

Seineldín was arrested because he wrote to the President rather than going through General Bonnet. As he explained in his letter, he considered it his duty "to warn the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of something that is extremely dangerous for the future of the Argentine nation and its Armed Forces." The colonel repeated that far from being united, "the Argentine Army is increasingly fractured . . . [and] the best men have been separated from the ranks and persecuted administratively."

In the midst of this national crisis, Carlos Menem left the country for a 10-day tour of Rome, Warsaw, and Moscow. Upon hearing of Seineldín's letter, however, he sent back word that he considered it to be quite "unimportant," since the colonel, in his view, was "totally discredited."