

Carlos Menem provokes military uprising in Argentina

by Cynthia R. Rush

Since taking power in May 1989, Argentine President Carlos Menem has deliberately pursued the Bush administration policy of dismantling the institution of the armed forces. While his free market economic policies gutted military capabilities, reduced troop strength, and slashed budgets, Menem authorized the Army high command to persecute anyone who opposed his policy. The Argentine President repeatedly provoked the nationalist faction led by Col. Mohamed Ali Seineldín, lying that it represented a threat to the constitutional order, and jailing or firing officers while refusing to address the grievances they raised.

On Dec. 3, Menem's policies finally brought about the intended result. Just two days before the expected arrival in Buenos Aires of George Bush, a group of 300 nationalist officers rebelled against the Army high command, captured Army headquarters at the Libertador building in Buenos Aires, and occupied four other installations for much of that day, before finally surrendering in the evening. As a result of shootouts between the nationalist forces and troops deployed by the government, 20 people died and another 200 were wounded. Close to 370 people, mostly military personnel, are under arrest.

Lying that the military uprising constituted a coup attempt against his government, Menem moved quickly to brutally repress it. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Martín Bonnet vowed to "annihilate" the nationalists if they failed to surrender, and announced plans to bomb the Libertador building. On the same day, Menem also signed a decree providing summary judgment for soldiers or officers who took part in the uprising. From Brasilia, where he was meeting with President Fernando Collor, George Bush offered full backing for Menem's "democracy," and announced he would arrive in Buenos Aires on Dec. 5 as scheduled.

In his press conference in the evening of Dec. 3, Menem shrieked that those who participated in the military uprising were "criminals" and fringe elements who had cold-bloodedly executed officers loyal to the government. "The President's pulse will not falter" in imposing the harshest penalties on such murderers, he said. Menem announced that in some cases, the death penalty could be imposed for acts of

rebellion. Army Chief of Staff General Bonnet has complained that civilian courts shouldn't be involved in trying the rebels, because they tend to levy more "benign" sentences than military tribunals. Defense Minister Humberto Romero announced that same evening that Colonel Seineldín had authored a letter from San Martín de los Andes where he is jailed, taking full responsibility for the uprising, stating that the participants were following his orders, and requesting transfer to the location where those under arrest are being held. Romero also reported that Seineldín had requested a revolver and one bullet with which to commit suicide.

Although Seineldín took responsibility for the uprising, whether he personally gave the orders or whether he made this claim as a matter of military honor, remains a question mark. Since late October, the nationalist leader has been jailed at a remote base in San Martín de los Andes in Neuquen province, on charges of insubordination, and has had little communication with the outside world. It is unclear that he could have organized such an action.

In a statement reported in the Dec. 5 *La Nación*, Mrs. Marta Labiau de Seineldín also denied that her husband had requested a revolver in order to commit suicide. "That is not true," she said. "He is a man of profound Christian convictions and never would have done something like that." Reporting that the commander of the regiment where her husband was being held had confirmed that the story was false, Mrs. Seineldín said that the purpose of this report was to discredit her husband and "stain his honor." Another high-level military source consulted by *La Nación* described the report as a "fabrication." The story may be more directly related to the fact that the Anglo-American establishment, and spokesmen such as Henry Kissinger, would prefer to see Seineldín dead.

Menem responsible

In his Dec. 5 press conference in Buenos Aires, Bush praised Menem for not allowing "any group to return Argentina to the days of violence and dictatorship" and lauded the President's "superb show of strength and commitment."

In reality, it is Menem's commitment to dismantling the

institution of the armed forces, and the months of provocations against Army nationalists, which are responsible for the violence and deaths which occurred on Dec. 3. Nationalists had repeatedly warned that Menem's plan to "restructure" the armed forces, converting it—as per Washington's demands—into a Panamanian-style constabulary, constituted a threat to national sovereignty and independent economic development. He ignored them.

Just a few days prior to the Dec. 3 action, he signed a decree authorizing the "rationalization" of the armed forces. According to sources quoted in the Nov. 30 weekly intelligence sheet *El Informador Público*, the law could mean a 30 to 40% reduction in active military personnel, and firing of 28,000 civilian employees of the armed forces. Military sources consulted by the publication warned that this would mean removing from the armed forces some of the best trained and most technically competent personnel.

In addition, the government's free market economic program entails the privatization of tens of public companies controlled by the armed forces. Many of these, such as the military industries complex Fabricaciones Militares, the giant Somisa steel company, or the General Mosconi petrochemical complex, have for years been engaged in scientific, technological, and infrastructural projects vital to the country's economic development. Now, they are slated to be handed over to private domestic or foreign interests, including, according to *El Informador*, to Brazilian and Chilean companies linked to the armed forces of those countries. For the nationalist sector of the Army, which views industrial and technological development as essential to national security, these policies were intolerable.

That the scientific and technological capabilities of the armed forces are the target of the Anglo-American establishment was revealed in a Dec. 3 statement made by Luis Macaya, lieutenant governor of Buenos Aires province. Borrowing from Bush's ravings about Iraq, the Peronist official claimed that the nationalist military must immediately be "put in its place," because, otherwise, together with elements of the Brazilian armed forces, it intended to produce a "little nuclear bomb."

Hemispheric implications

In the aftermath of the Dec. 3 events, the press organs of the Anglo-American establishment issued warnings to the Menem government to quickly crush the institution of the armed forces and show that his nation is eligible to receive foreign investment and other "benefits" promised by the Bush administration. Only if it establishes "minimal stability," which implies smashing any military resistance to its policies, can Argentina improve its standard of living and invite foreign investment, the *Washington Post* editorialized on Dec. 4. On the same day, the *New York Times* threatened that Menem would only gain the respect of the international community if he "rethinks" his military policy and refuses to

make any further concessions to the armed forces.

There is little question that, as these articles suggest, the Anglo-Americans will now step up their offensive against the institution of the armed forces throughout Ibero-America. It is unimportant to them that, as real production collapses as a result of free market policies, far from bringing the "stability" demanded by the *Washington Post*, destruction of the military will signify a major threat to hemispheric security. If the free market policies imposed by Menem, Collor, Carlos Andrés Pérez and others remain in place, the narcoterrorism and Theology of Liberation-backed ecologism which already exist in some countries, will be reproduced not only in Argentina, but continent-wide.

Despite this reality, the Anglo-American establishment demands that obstacles to Bush's free trade schemes, embodied in his "Enterprise for the Americas," be removed. José Manuel de la Sota, Argentina's ambassador to Brazil, reflected this thinking in the proposal he made at a Dec. 4 luncheon in Brasilia, attended by President Fernando Collor and ambassadors of 21 other Ibero-American and Caribbean countries.

Referencing the military events in Argentina, de la Sota suggested that Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay sign an accord to "defend democracy." Should any of these nations be the victims of a military coup, he said, their neighbors should respond with sanctions, trade embargoes, and even send troops to the affected country. The Argentine ambassador explained that his proposal would stipulate that in order to be eligible for membership in the common market now under discussion, countries must be democracies. "There can be no economic stability without political stability," he added, and recommended that if a dictatorial regime were installed in any of the member countries, that nation would be expelled from the common market.

In a similar vein, José Luis Manzano, president of the Peronist bloc of the Argentine Congress, told reporters on Dec. 5 that justice had to be swiftly meted out to those who participated in the Dec. 3 action, as a lesson to those who might be thinking of sabotaging Menem's "democratic" agenda. Manzano insisted that the nationalists had staged their action in order to interfere with such key foreign policies as sending troops to the Persian Gulf, the "peaceful agreement with Great Britain," and Argentina's economic integration with its neighbors. What they wanted, he said, "was to create an isolated Argentina, like Noriega in Panama."

Manzano announced that the government is now investigating civilian businessmen who it thinks financed the nationalist military uprising, and will also look into the nationalists' alleged "international connections." Indicating the type of witchhunt environment already created, Sen. Eduardo Menem, the President's brother, stated that those who gave money to the nationalist military movement "should know that they are guilty of murder, of destruction and public disturbances."