

Argentine nationalists remember Malvinas War, despite Menem

by Cynthia R. Rush

The two Presidents who have ruled Argentina since 1983, Carlos Menem and Raúl Alfonsín, have done everything possible to stamp out the meaning of Argentina's retaking of the Malvinas Islands from Great Britain on April 2, 1982. As the country has increasingly submitted to foreign usury over the past ten years, especially since Menem took office in 1989, many patriots saw this process as the attempt to *desmalvinizar* the nation—wipe out the memory of its nationalism, of the times in its history it has stood up to foreign imperialism and defended national sovereignty—as if these were some kind of a crime.

This year, in his remarks on the April 2 anniversary, Menem stated explicitly that in retaking the Malvinas in 1982, the Armed Forces *had* committed a crime, for which they had been duly punished, including with jail sentences. The Argentine President reportedly made a deal with Great Britain that there would be no ceremonies of any significance on April 2, and even decreed that from now on, that date would be known as the sufficiently neutral "Day of the War Veteran."

But there is nothing neutral about what is occurring throughout Ibero-America right now, as political forces in every country have decided that they have had enough of the International Monetary Fund's austerity policies and the fake democracy that goes along with them. Argentina has not yet been hit with the pots and pans demonstrations (*cacerolazos*) seen in Caracas, Venezuela, and other major cities. But military and civilian patriots who mobilized to make April 2 what it *should be*—a recommitment to the defense of national sovereignty—so unnerved the Argentine President that he didn't dare attend a scheduled ceremony in the southern city of Rio Gallegos, for fear of being publicly humiliated.

The Malvinas 'cry of independence'

Carlos Menem's worst nightmare is that the nationalist military known as "painted faces"—*carapintadas* for the camouflage paint used in battle—whose leader is Malvinas War hero Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, will become the rallying point for the same type of civil-military anti-IMF mobilization now emerging in other parts of the continent. The potential for that to happen is real.

Seineldín and other nationalist officers are in jail as a result of the events of Dec. 3, 1990, when they rebelled

against the high command's acquiescence to the U.S.-dictated policy of destroying the institution of the Armed Forces. But, in the days leading up to April 2, patriots in at least ten provinces mobilized to paint walls and put up posters of the colonel, which read "Seineldín is present." This flurry of activity became the basis for rumors reaching the presidential palace, the Pink House that some kind of military rebellion might take place on April 2, and drove Menem into ever more frenzied public attacks on the *carapintadas*. He explained that he didn't want to go to Rio Gallegos, because he wasn't willing to tolerate any "form of public protest."

The cause of the Argentine President's hysteria is that Colonel Seineldín reminds his countrymen of those things which Menem, in his obscene embrace of George Bush's new world order, would rather they forget. In a moving April 2 statement recalling the 1982 retaking of the Malvinas, Seineldín noted that "we can never forget the joy and enthusiasm we felt in that patriotic endeavor. It was the most important dawn of our contemporary history. Our hearts were filled with emotion . . . anxious to land, to give the cry of independence from Anglo-Saxon imperialism which for almost two centuries has had a nefarious influence on the culture, politics, and economy of the Argentine nation." The colonel recalled that the 1982 conflict had united "all those Latin American citizens, anxious to build, once and for all, the United States of South America . . . and in this way, definitively solve the immense problems which afflict us."

It was the thought of such a project coming into being which most terrified the Anglo-American establishment in 1982, and still does today; and caused them to employ every means at their disposal to make sure it didn't occur. As Seineldín noted in his statement, "treason showed itself once more in the history of our Nation. Small men, both military and civilians, who sold their souls to foreigners . . . frustrated our sacred objective." And Carlos Menem, he added, has done nothing but "continue this high treason . . . crawling before Anglo-Saxon imperialism and handing over our cultural, political, economic and military patrimony . . . reducing the marvelous Argentine people to injustice, corruption, loss of territory, depopulation, and whatever genocide which favors foreign interests, thus spitting on those sacred dead who rest in the Malvinas seas."

'We shall always resist'

Seineldín ended his April 2 statement with this: "As long as there is one Argentine of good will, wherever he may be found, we shall participate and resist, so as to never forget the cry of independence of April 2, 1982, and not allowing cheap politics, hypocrisy, or forgetfulness to frustrate us."

This battle cry has struck terror in Carlos Menem's heart. In an interview with the daily *La Nación* published April 4, Menem went out of his way to explain why the events which rocked Venezuela in early February couldn't possibly happen in Argentina. "In Venezuela, adjustment policies in the form of shock [therapy] have been implemented which, among other things, caused the *Caracazo*"—the riots of February 1989 against President Carlos Andrés Pérez's economic policies. Moreover, Menem claimed, "it was a policy put into effect without growth, whereas in Argentina, we have had adjustment policies with growth and recovery." He went on to say that unemployment is down, which means that social explosions are unlikely. In a late-March interview, Menem predicted that within a few years, poverty will be virtually eliminated in Argentina.

Yet when Pope John Paul II suggested during a mid-March ceremony to receive Argentina's new ambassador to the Vatican that the government's free market program was hurting the country's poor, and urged that the burden of the adjustment program be shared equally, Menem hit the ceiling. Both he and his closest advisers insisted that the pope was wrong, that the pontiff was working with the "wrong statistics" and didn't really understand Argentina's reality.

In insulting fashion, Menem railed that the pope "always says this about Third World countries." A few days later, the Finance Ministry, run by the Harvard-trained Domingo Cavallo, issued a hardly believable statement explaining that the \$3 billion deal just signed with the IMF—which entails harsh austerity—will "protect low income groups" and improve social services by eliminating waste and duplication.

With the same hysterical tone, the Argentine President has also stepped up the campaign to portray Seineldín and his allies as terrorists and coup-mongers. The press has given extensive coverage to the arrest of an "ex" *carapintada* in association with the March 17 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, and Menem adviser Bernardo Neustadt used his popular nightly television program to report on alleged links between the embassy bombing and individuals close to Seineldín.

In statements published in the March 30 *Página 12*, Menem charged that there was no essential difference between the Cuban-linked terrorists who attacked the La Tablada army base in January 1989, and the *carapintadas* who rebelled against the Army high command in December 1990. "I believe that the Dec. 30 uprising, for example, was a clear act of terrorism . . . the *carapintadas* are terrorists and should be in jail." Coinciding with these statements, the media publicized the fact that enforcement of regulations was



Col. Mohamed Ali Seineldín, the hero of Argentina's Malvinas war against Great Britain, during his 1991 frameup trial on charges of "rebellion."

lax at the Magdalena military prison where Seineldín and other officers are jailed, describing their imprisonment as more like a "country club" environment. Immediately, the federal courts canceled all visits to the prison, removed and punished the prison director, and threatened to transfer some of the officers to other locations.

None of these measures will change the reality that, like other Ibero-American heads of state who have subjected their citizens to the IMF's draconian austerity policies, Menem is not loved. During the April 2 rally of 5,000 patriots at the Plaza de los Dos Congresos in Buenos Aires, the President's name was greeted with hisses, boos and epithets, while in Río Gallegos, his stand-in, Defense Minister Antonio Erman González, didn't fare much better. Posters and banners held by demonstrators denounced the government's policy of handing over state-sector companies, especially those involved in natural resource exploitation, and charged the government with treason.

The pope's remarks about Menem's economic policy has also unleashed a debate within the Catholic Church which has further highlighted the pontiff's criticisms. While Cardinal Antonio Quarracino has gone out of his way to play down the Pope's statements, and defend Menem, Bishop Jorge Casaretto wrote in a pastoral letter published April 3 that a large part of Argentina's poverty is caused by "unjust economic systems, the 'structures of sin' as the Pope calls them." Liberalism, he said, "can fall [into the category] of what the Pope defines as 'savage capitalism.' "