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45

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MILITARY RULE THREE YEARS LATER

Argentina's Junta: Apparent Stability Masks Unrest

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This weekend marks the third grim anniversary of Argentina's descent into military dictatorship.

Three years ago on March 24, Americans in the U.S. government and in the private business sector concerned with political and economic relations with Argentina gave sigh of relief when the military, headed by Gen. Jorge afael Videla, efficiently deposed the constitutional vernment under President Isabel Peron and replaced it ith a military junta. The military claimed it was compelled to intervene to end social chaos, official corruption, and bversive activity, and to prevent the total collapse of the onomy. After the coup, the junta promoted the image of ace and stability.

At the time, there were few critics prepared to risk their outations by maintaining that the nation was about to be ept into political repression and economic stagnation instead of gliding into the promised era of progress and prosrity. But now, few would disagree that the violence and aos of the last three years has exceeded the most pessistic forecast.

According to statistics compiled by the Washington C.-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs and other U.S. ternational agencies, Argentina continues to be the hesphere's major human-rights violator, with more politil prisoners in its jails, more innocent citizens murdered d more government opponents abducted than those in the rest of Latin America combined. This deplorable cord has prompted other governments, and international d nongovernmental organizations, to demand that Arntine authorities curb their excesses, release the victims, d respect fundamental human rights.

In the United States, congressional investigations and gislative initiatives have induced the Carter Administran to impose a ban on all sales of military equipment and aining to Argentina on human-rights grounds. Nevertheless, the Argentine government ignores world public opinion pressure to open its jails, arguing that it cannot sk releasing former guerrillas (a fraction of those now ing detained) to rejoin their former colleagues, and fearg that testimonies from torture victims might further fuel international condemnation. In fact, despite damage to its international image, the majority of the military believes that the "dirty war against subversion" has paid off. They claim to have eliminated 85% of the guerrillas who in 1975 were confidently predicting a revolutionary victory before the end of the decade. But the pace of repression has not lessened.

Matters are equally dismal on the economic front. The Argentine economy remains sunk in its deepest recession since the 1930s. Its gross national product for 1978 fell by 4.1% down to the level of 1973. While the cost of living has risen higher than that of the United States, real wages have been cut by 60% since 1975, and are today less than one-third of comparable wages for American workers. The inflation rate for 1978 was, again, one of the highest in the world, 169.8%.

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In the words of a general once in charge of counterinsurgency operations in Tucuman Province: "For every guerrilla that I killed, the economic polices of Martinez de Hoz are breeding 10. . . ."

The sharp drops, in domestic consumption and industrial production have combined to cut imports and to permit the accumulation of $6 billion in foreign reserves. Yet the aggressive policy of Martinez de Hoz to contract huge foreign loans from multinational banks—like Chase Manhattan—at several points above prime without planning for their use, leads to a further accumulation of reserves. These loans are often made more for political than economic reasons. In addition, a series of recently publicized financial scandals points to high-level official corruption.

Elements for mass mobilization and social upheaval are present in Argentina today—fear of political repression at the hands of the present government and economic hardship as a result of government policies. Little wonder many of the regime's supporters are anxious.

And it is not surprising that despite military takeovers of trade unions and stiff penalties for labor-organizing activities, hundreds of strikes and other work-protest actions took place last year. The military, however, remains determined to closely regulate and limit the scope of trade-union activities by abolishing industry-wide union organizations and banning regional and national federations and confederations. Under a proposed law, unions would be prevented from supporting any political parties, a measure obviously intended to break the links between the labor movement and Peronism. It would also force the dismantling of the 47-year-old Central General Confederation of Labor (CGT)—a union analogous to the AFL-CIO.

Signs of a growing anti-government undercurrent are visible everywhere, though foreign personnel stationed in Argentina often ignore them. Last September, for example, nearly one million people joined the yearly pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin of Lujan. The message of the march, delivered in speeches by bishops and priests, was unmistakably political. There were pleas for social justice, for respect of human rights and against a threatened war with Chile. Other Argentines echo these concerns. Just last December, the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the largest human-rights organization in Argentina, presented Gen. Videla with a request for information on 4,881 disappeared persons. Every major political party was represented among the signers.

All this unrest constitutes only the tip of the iceberg of the broad-based anti-dictatorial movement.

Determined to maintain control, Argentina's military junta has made only cosmetic changes. Gen. Videla donned a new designation—"civilian" president. A handful of foreign political detainees have been freed from prison and allowed to return to their own countries. The other members of the junta that seized power three years ago have been replaced by the officers next in seniority in their respective branches. Those who have borne the brunt of governmental policies since 1976 see in these "gestures of reconciliation" only futile attempts on the part of the regime to mask their failure and vulnerability with an illusion of stability, institutionalization and legitimacy. But on this third anniversary of the current regime, Argentina simmers with resentment against its leaders. And time may be running out for the generals.

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Part V, p. 2