

Indictment of Argentina's military alarms political establishment

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Outgoing Argentine President Carlos Menem has bitterly opposed moves by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon to indict 98 former Argentine military officers for carrying out atrocities. Garzon's 282-page arrest warrant, issued in Madrid on November 3, documents some of the crimes committed under military rule from 1976 to 1983. During the military's "Dirty War" its officers killed about 30,000 people and illegally imprisoned and tortured many others.

Garzon issued the warrant that brought about last year's arrest of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Menem has refused to cooperate in bringing military officers to trial, saying it was "totally out of the question and out of place. This is an absurd intervention in internal affairs of a sovereign country". Ricardo Gil Lavedra, named as justice minister in the newly-formed Alliance government of president-elect Fernando De la Rúa, echoed Menem's arguments, stating that only Argentine courts could try crimes committed on Argentine territory. "It seems impossible for a request like this to prosper," he said.

The indictments include leaders of the military dictatorship, Jorge Videla and Leopoldo Galtieri, as well as organisers of torture centres, such as Admiral Emilio Massera. Garzon, an investigative judge, spent three years looking into the deaths of 600 people of Spanish descent under the military's rule. After accumulating evidence, he extended the investigation to include charges of torture, terrorism and genocide.

His investigations led him to "Operation Condor," an agreement between Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay in 1975 to co-ordinate their security forces. The military of one country was given the freedom to operate in another in order to pursue, abduct, murder and clandestinely extradite political opponents. Garzon said that in Chile and Argentina "an armed organisation ... took advantage of the military structure and usurped

power to institutionalise a terrorist regime with impunity".

To date, Argentine military officers have been free to walk away from their crimes, thanks to the protection afforded them by both the traditional business parties, the Radical Party (now part of the Alliance) and the Peronists (Justicialist Party), followers of the late Juan Peron.

One of the most notorious killers is Alfredo Astiz, a retired navy captain known as the "blond angel of death". In a 1998 interview he stated: "The navy taught me how to destroy, how to plant bombs, how to infiltrate, how to kill. I might have made some small mistakes, but in the big things I don't regret anything. Do you know what? I'm technically the best-trained man in this country to kill a politician or a journalist".

Astiz was renowned for infiltrating human rights groups. In 1990 a French court sentenced him to life imprisonment in absentia for the murder of two nuns. Their bodies washed ashore two months after they had been taken for questioning to the naval mechanics school. Astiz remains free, and receives a military pension, like most officers involved in the killings.

In 1989, President Alfonsín of the Radical Party introduced two laws to curtail attempts to deal with the ex-military in the civilian courts—after he had been elected on a pledge to take forward human rights and bring to justice those who perpetrated crimes during military rule. His Peronist successor Menem went further in 1990. He granted an amnesty to all imprisoned military officers, in the interests of "national unity".

The collaboration of the Peronists with the military did not end there. In 1994, Eduardo Duhalde, the Peronists' 1999 presidential candidate, struck a deal with Aldo Rico, who dismantled his extreme right-wing MODIN party and joined the Peronists. Rico backed a reform of the provincial constitution to enable Duhalde to stand again in elections for the governorship of Buenos Aires.

Rico is a former army colonel who led two mutinies against the Alfonsin government in 1987 to demand an end to civilian trials of the military. The 150 mutineers demanded that the government state its support for the military's past actions. Alfonsin complied, saying they had been "necessary to recover the institutions of the nation".

In June this year Rico and a gang of armed men seized the Larcade hospital. Rico, who was elected mayor of San Miguel two years ago, said the staff would be disciplined for bad manners. Doctors said Rico intended to privatise the public hospital and was using the armed occupation as a means for doing so. Under military rule, it was commonplace for military officers to target hospitals, schools and universities for such takeovers.

The Peronists are strengthening the hand of the military in the official political framework. Their political campaigns are virtually indistinguishable from those of the extreme right-wing parties. Carlos Ruckauf, Argentina's outgoing vice-president, recently made a vitriolic call for law and order in his successful bid for election as governor of Buenos Aires province. He said the way to defeat crime was to "pump criminals full of bullets." He suggested that police shoot at criminals' arms and legs without prior warning.

After winning the election Ruckauf said he would name Rico as his justice minister and appoint Luis Patti, an ex-policeman, as an advisor on crime. Human rights groups accuse Patti of systematic torture in the detention camps.

Garzon's investigation poses problems for the Argentine political establishment. It threatens to reveal the rotten foundations on which civilian rule in Argentina was re-established. Both the Radicals and Peronists have protected the military butchers and have placed them in key positions of power within the Argentine state.



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