

Political conflict between Argentinian president and intelligence agencies intensifies

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7 February 2015

The fallout in Argentina from the mysterious death of a prosecutor in January has exposed to the public a power struggle at the highest levels of the state.

On February 1, a Buenos Aires newspaper reported that prosecutor Alberto Nisman—who was found dead on January 18 with a suspicious gunshot wound to the head—had prepared draft warrants for the arrest of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Foreign Minister Hector Timmerman, and Congressman Andres Larroque preceding his death.

Government authorities had previously asserted that Nisman's death was a suicide, despite autopsy reports that indicate he had been shot. In a televised speech on January 26, President Fernandez deflected blame for Nisman's death by claiming rogue intelligence agents were responsible. She subsequently called for the dissolution of Argentina's Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE).

Before his death, Nisman was tasked with investigating allegations that the Argentinian government was involved in covering up for Iranian involvement in a 1994 bombing of a Jewish Center in Buenos Aires that left 85 dead. On the eve of his death, he had presented 300 pages of documents in court indicting President Fernandez and Foreign Minister Timmerman in the cover-up. According to Nisman, the Fernandez administration had offered immunity to Iranian suspects in return for a deal with Iran involving oil and grain shipments. Nisman was due to present evidence to Argentina's legislature on January 19—the day after his death.

As is the case with most such power struggles within the capitalist state, in Argentina and elsewhere, the real facts relating to Nisman's death and the alleged government dealings with Iran remain hidden from the public.

What the crisis does reveal, however, is a fierce power struggle for control of the Argentinian state involving an increasingly unpopular president and a police-intelligence apparatus with close ties to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

SIDE is an organization whose roots are in the brutal police-state dictatorships of the post-World War II period. Its record of service to the interests of the Argentinian bourgeoisie and American imperialism is long and sordid. Under the Onganía dictatorship of 1966-1969, the organization became a closely-knit corps of young ultra-right-wing university graduates who were trained and tested in intelligence gathering against political opponents of the regime.

During the Videla dictatorship of 1976-1983, SIDE assumed many of the functions of the former Argentine Anti-communist Alliance, with whom SIDE collaborated during the second Peronist government of 1972-1976. SIDE was responsible for drawing up lists of opponents of the regime to be disappeared, tortured and murdered. It took part in the infamous US-backed "Operation Condor" for the coordinated kidnapping and murder of opponents of the dictatorships throughout the Southern Cone (Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Argentina), while expropriating bank accounts and other assets of disappeared Uruguayan exiles.

It operated outside the law in complicity with the CIA, with its own network of clandestine prisons and virtually unlimited funds.

SIDE's close relations with the CIA continue to this day. In 2002, SIDE head Miguel Angel Tome met with CIA officials in New York and declared that SIDE would coordinate with the CIA in the "war on terror," as well as on the spread of weapons of mass destruction and drug interdictions.

SIDE sits atop the Argentinian intelligence and

military apparatus. Following the restoration of civilian rule, SIDE remained a bulwark of the social layer most closely tied materially and politically to the old dictatorships.

Given the long and continuing history of CIA involvement in Argentina, it would be naive to assume that the CIA is a disinterested party in the current crisis.

Nisman, an important SIDE official, appears to have been very much part of the relationship between SIDE and the CIA. WikiLeaks cables collected by Argentinian journalist Santiago O'Donnell in 2011 and 2014 prove that the CIA was more than just a source for Nisman, and that the US agency guided the course of his investigation.

President Fernandez is seeking to exploit widespread opposition to the police-intelligence apparatus to put a "left" veneer on her proposal to disband SIDE. But her maneuver is an attempt to maintain power, and not a genuine effort to curtail the powers of the military-intelligence apparatus. The new spy agency Fernandez is proposing to create in SIDE's place will play a similar role in defending the Argentinian state against social opposition from below.

Whether Argentina's military-intelligence "state within a state" will permit any significant change is another matter. In Argentina, as in the United States, this apparatus wields immense power and is prepared to carry out great crimes to keep it.

The crisis developing at the highest levels of the state is one which concerns workers in Argentina and throughout the world. Regardless of the immediate outcome of the power struggle, the crisis gives a glimpse of the level of criminality to which the ruling elite will resort to maintain its grip on the levers of state power.

An important lesson must be drawn from these events, however they play out: it is not possible to purge the government of its military-intelligence apparatus without purging society of capitalism. Such a task falls to the working class of Argentina and the world.



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