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"Menem's agenda is ambitious and must be implemented swiftly. . . . Few doubt that Menem wants changes in the nation's economic structure, but, as always, most Argentines are skeptical about his chances of success."

The Peronists Triumph in Argentina

BY GARY W. WYNIA

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RAÚL Alfonsín's presidency is quickly becoming ancient history in Argentina. After thriving on democracy's restoration, Alfonsín gradually saw his leadership crumble, leaving him no choice but to turn over the presidency to Peronist Carlos Saúl Menem in July, 1989, six months ahead of schedule.

Alfonsín, the Radical Civic Union's leader, had hoped to reach the finish line when he introduced a new economic program in August, 1988. Labeled the Primavera Plan (Spring Plan), it sought to decelerate inflation—prices had risen by 26 percent in July—and attract financing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United States, for a total of \$2.5 billion.

But Argentina's creditors, still unhappy about Alfonsín's halting interest payments early in 1988, balked at his request. When the new loans failed to arrive, it became impossible for the Central Bank either to prop up the Argentine currency (the austral) at 14 australes to the dollar (U.S.\$) or to hold down prices. The Primavera Plan unraveled in February, 1989, taking public confidence in Alfonsín's leadership down with it.¹

Eduardo Angeloz, the Radical Civic Union party's presidential candidate in the May, 1989, presidential and congressional elections, insisted that Juan Sourrouille and his economic team be dismissed; Alfonsín reluctantly complied in March, even though it was obvious that this action would do little to increase the government's popularity. Alfonsín knew that he was losing economically, but it was not until after the election that one of his economists admitted failure in establishing control over the government's inflated budget. The Primavera Plan had been a last-minute exercise in economic acrobatics, but it was wholly inadequate.² Prices rose again, first "only" by 9.6 percent in February, then by 18 percent in March, and 33 percent in April, 1989, leaving the electorate in no

mood to elect another Radical to the presidency.

Carlos Saúl Menem was the first person the Peronists (the Justicialista party) ever nominated in a direct primary election rather than in a party convention controlled by a few dozen politicians and labor leaders. The direct election was crucial to his success, since Buenos Aires governor Antonio Cafiero was preferred by most of the leadership. Only 1.7 million of the party's 4.1 million members bothered to turn out for the July, 1988, primary, but 53 percent of those who did voted for Menem rather than for the favored Cafiero.

Starting in August, Menem campaigned across the country, relying heavily on personal contact at the grass-roots level and exhibiting the same congeniality that had made him a popular governor in La Rioja province. Instead of stressing specific issues, Menem called for Argentina's "reunification," for greater productivity and for more social justice. And when these slogans did not excite anyone, he reminded them of what they had suffered during five years under Alfonsín: bouts of astronomical inflation, losses in real income and declining optimism about the nation's future.

By April, all 10 of the nation's polls predicted that Menem would win from 33 percent to 47 percent of the popular vote. When the ballots were counted on May 14 he came out on the high side, with 47 percent of the vote, compared with 37 percent for Eduardo Angeloz. Menem received majority support in only 8 out of 24 provinces, but he garnered a plurality in all but 5 of them, guaranteeing his victory in the Electoral College. The Peronists could now legitimately claim the right to govern the Argentine democracy.

The Peronists also added 17 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, which gave them a total of 127 seats, or exactly half the Chamber. Meanwhile, the Radicals lost a few seats and were left with just one-third of the Chamber under their control. None of this transformed the Peronist factions into a truly cohesive political party, but Menem's triumph was enough to assure him support in Congress during his first 100 days.

When asked why he lost, Angeloz confessed that

¹Judith Evans, "The February Crash," *Latin Finance*, May, 1989, p. 47.

²See interviews with government economist Adolfo Canitrot in *Somos* (Buenos Aires), May 24, 1989, pp. 48–52; and *Ambito Financiera* (Buenos Aires), May 28, 1989, p. 35.

the Radicals had not fully recovered from the defeat they had suffered in September, 1987, when the Peronists swept congressional and gubernatorial elections. Some Radicals just sat down and watched, Angeloz complained, while others pulled out altogether. Even Alfonsín, the much-admired democrat, took on the demeanor of the disgruntled politician who was pained to discover how quickly people in all social classes were turning against him.³

The Radicals, who several years before were claiming that they were building a new majority party, discovered how wrong they were. At first, Alfonsín had led Argentina adeptly, but that was never enough to secure the loyalty of more than 40 percent of the electorate. Had Alfonsín accomplished more with his economic policy, Angeloz probably would have triumphed in the presidential election of 1989, but the President's failure to turn his 1985 Austral Plan into a durable conquest of inflation doomed Angeloz. The acrobatics of the Primavera Plan never really came close to making up for this failure.

According to the constitution, Alfonsín was to turn over the presidency to Menem on December 1, 1989, six months after Menem's election. To survive that long, Alfonsín tried to get President-elect Menem to support his latest emergency stabilization program, which included a 40 percent increase in public service rates, a 10 percent tax increase on farm exports and a higher value-added tax. But Menem just watched as the public panicked and the value of the austral plummeted to 220 australes to the dollar. Fearful of a catastrophe, big business joined the general public in demanding that Alfonsín depart early and allow Menem to make a fresh start.

At first, Alfonsín resisted, going on television on May 23 to announce that he would stick it out; however, he quickly realized that he had become a lame duck who could do more for Argentina by departing gracefully than by hanging on. On July 8, he turned over the presidency to Menem. To his credit, Alfonsín left behind a country that was politically more democratic than it had been at any time in this century; but Argentines must also eat and pay rent, and most of them will remember Alfonsín for making it harder to do both.

A PERONIST SURPRISE

Carlos Saúl Menem fits no presidential stereotype. After completing law school in 1955 at age 20, he returned to La Rioja, one of Argentina's poorer

provinces, to practice law and Peronist politics. The son of Syrian immigrants who came to Argentina in 1912 and eventually prospered in the wine business, Menem cultivated the playboy image away from home and was not taken seriously in Buenos Aires. Yet he never lost touch with people in La Rioja, where he tried to run for governor in 1963 only to be stopped when the exiled Juan Perón ordered party members to boycott the election. When Menem tried again in 1973, he won easily.

The military evicted the Peronist government in 1976 and arrested Menem and other party leaders at the start of the *Proceso*. Five years passed before he was finally released, and to this day Menem says that he does not know why he was considered such a threat. Within Peronism, he was militant but never very radical; i.e., he wanted to rebuild a welfare state that was run by the Peronists. The champion of the provincial poor, Menem also admired the kinds of private enterprise that had allowed his father to prosper in his new country. It was not capitalism that he detested, but the people who practiced it without sharing their profits with their employees, the nation's poorest provinces and Peronist politicians.⁴

Menem is the most relaxed President that Argentines have ever seen, and he seems as happy on the *futbol* field and the tennis court as he is in the presidential office. Two weeks after his inauguration, the 59-year-old Menem played an entire *futbol* game alongside the famous star Diego Maradona to raise money to aid the poor. No recent Argentine President has ever dared such a feat or has been physically able to attempt it.

Menem enjoys asking anyone who chats with him to join his team, and he brags about being the consummate coalition-builder rather than the old-fashioned Peronist partisan. After his election, Menem spent almost as much time meeting with conservatives like Alvaro Alsogaray (a man once hated by Peronists) as he did with labor leaders. Where he was headed with such tactics no one was certain, but that apparently did not stop many of the Peronists' old opponents on the right from accepting his invitations.

Menem filled his Cabinet with loyal Peronists and several unaffiliated ministers. Peronists like union leader Jorge Triaca and lawyer Italo Luder were given the Labor and Defense Ministries, respectively, but the Foreign Ministry went to Domingo Cavallo, a free-trade economist with no party affiliation. Most surprising was his choice of little-known Miguel Roig to supervise the economic rescue operation. Roig was a retired executive from the Bunge & Born conglomerate, which was once Argentina's leading grain trader and was never a friend of Peronism. When Roig died of a heart at-

³*La Semana* (Buenos Aires), August 3, 1989, p. 15.

⁴For more on Menem's biography, see the book by journalists Alfredo Leuco and Jose Antonio Diaz, *El heredero de Peron* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1989).

tack on July 14 (just 5 days after his appointment), Menem quickly appointed Nestor Rapanelli, another Bunge & Born vice president, to replace Roig. He was convinced that executives from large corporations were the only people who could induce their colleagues to help him end the nation's economic crisis.

Menem's consultations with business leaders actually began six months before his election, when Jorge Born offered his firm's services to help prepare Menem's economic program. A little over a decade ago, the Born brothers had been kidnapped by young extremists and had to pay several million dollars for their release while the Peronist government stood by and watched. But in 1989 business and government needed one another, so Born set aside his displeasure with Peronism.

Bunge & Born executives subscribe to the annual macroeconomic analyses of Argentina written by North American consultant and Nobel prize-winner Lawrence Klein, a personal friend of Jorge Born's. At the end of 1988, Klein forecast high inflation and an abrupt decline in consumption by mid-1989, dangers greatly feared by Born since his enterprises produced as much for the domestic market as they did for export. Confident that Menem would win the election, Born shared the data with him during the campaign. Then, when Menem discovered that he would take office in July rather than December, he turned immediately to Born for more assistance. At Born's invitation, Menem attended an elaborate presentation by the firm's economists on May 23, where they outlined the problems Argentina faced and explained why the new President had to avert a collapse in consumption. Menem agreed and immediately appointed Miguel Roig to act on what the Bunge & Born economists had proposed.⁵

Economic recovery would not be easy. Menem's election had not served to halt inflation. On the contrary: in May, prices rose 78 percent and in June, 114 percent. With a nearly bare treasury, huge debts and a virtually collapsed economy on his hands, Menem knew that populism would have to wait. In the meantime, he asked the Bunge & Born people to draft immediate remedies. Their program was more immoderate and economically more orthodox than the program that Klein had suggested. The original Bunge & Born proposal had been neo-Keynesian in its approach, mixing the promotion of consumption with some fiscal austerity. But with inflation out of control in June, more drastic measures were necessary.

Initially, the medicine was bitter. Roig started by

⁵*La Nación* (Buenos Aires), July 23, 1989.

⁶*The New York Times*, September 11, 1989.

⁷*The New York Times*, September 15, 1989.

devaluing the austral to 630 to the dollar (in just four years, the austral had depreciated by an incredible 60,000 percent). Most shocking to the Argentine consumer, he raised public utility prices. Gasoline, for example, went from about U.S.\$0.40 a gallon to over \$1.50 in one day. Next, he froze wages and persuaded major industries to freeze prices for 90 days. The program worked swiftly: prices, which had risen 196 percent in July, went up only 38 percent in August and rose even less in September.

Menem next asked Congress to pass two vital bills aimed at drastically reducing the size and cost of the Argentine government. It was public knowledge that the government's many enterprises were plagued by huge deficits—\$1 billion for YPF (the state-owned petroleum company), \$500 million for the railways, \$430 million for Segba (the state-owned electric power company) and less for others, totaling \$5.5 billion in 1988 alone.⁶ Printing new money in order to pay these bills meant higher inflation.

The State Reform bill authorized the privatization of several government corporations—something the Peronists had intensely opposed three years earlier when the Radicals had proposed a milder version. But Menem argued that without transferring ownership, the government could not control its finances. As quickly as possible, private corporations, including multinationals, would be invited to buy all or part of the largest government firms.

The second piece of legislation, known as the Emergency bill, instructed authorities to suspend tax and financial subsidies directed at the private sector. It also proposed bolder efforts to end widespread tax evasion in an attempt to raise the government revenue from 16 percent of the gross national product (GNP) to 24 percent.⁷ After a brief debate and some opposition from the Radicals, Congress passed both the State Reform bill and the Emergency bill with only minor revisions.

Economic growth was not ignored, although for a time it would have to be more concentrated than usual. Specifically, Menem wants to produce more petroleum and natural gas for export and to boost farm production. The former was to be accomplished by bringing more foreign capital into the oil business, a step that Alfonsín had begun a few years earlier. For the rest of the industrial sector, emphasis was to be placed on encouraging firms that produced goods primarily for export.

Menem hoped these measures would impress the IMF. Annual interest on the debt was U.S.\$6 billion, but the trade surplus was only U.S.\$3.5 billion. If Argentina were to begin paying interest again, it would need the financing that was denied

Alfonsín during his last year. Menem promised the IMF that he would lower inflation to 15 percent annually, reduce the fiscal deficit to 1.8 percent of the GNP and stimulate the economy to grow at around 6 percent in 1990, incredibly ambitious objectives. But without such promises, he stood no chance of receiving IMF stand-by loans.⁸

Menem had little choice; he had to force Argentines to accept austerity, unpopular as that might be. Austerity was not a Peronist solution, but it was dictated by an ugly reality that everyone recognized. In his own defense, Menem never tired of insisting that it was "better that people insult me for a year and applaud me for a century, rather than the other way around."⁹ This was a different Menem from the Menem who, as governor of La Rioja province between 1983 and 1987, had more than doubled the number of people on the provincial payroll and issued worthless bonds to help pay their wages.

Predictably, organized labor was not enthusiastic about Menem's economics, so he tried to head off protests that might undermine him. Since Saul Ubaldini, the secretary general of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), had thrived on leading the opposition to similar measures undertaken by Alfonsín, Menem wants him replaced. Replacing Ubaldini will not be easy, however, since much of Ubaldini's support comes from the powerful Metal Workers Union headed by Lorenzo Miguel, one of Menem's supporters in the election.

Menem cannot afford to alienate labor leaders the way that Isabel Perón did a decade earlier, so he has chosen to work quietly through CGT factions that share his desire to evict Ubaldini. Menem's dilemma is obvious: a united movement that supports him will make him nearly invulnerable politically, but a movement that turns against him could quickly ruin his economic rescue operation. Similarly, a divided CGT might find it hard to resist Menem, but division risks radicalizing opposing factions that might feel compelled to prove their militancy to the rank and file. That is why Menem has chosen to be careful in dealing with the CGT's leadership, at first doing little more than privately making his preference for Ubaldini's replacement well-known.¹⁰

MILITARY AFFAIRS

Many officers began 1989 unhappily. They claimed to support constitutional government, but they wanted better treatment from civilian authorities. For some, the issue was still their dis-

satisfaction with the prosecution and conviction of officers who had killed several thousand civilians over a decade ago. Alfonsín and the Congress responded to their complaints in 1987 by prohibiting the trial of any except the most senior officers, but this action had not satisfied them. In addition, many younger officers were unhappy with the generals and admirals who refused to reorganize and modernize their services in the wake of the Falklands (Malvinas) War, and with Alfonsín's reluctance to make the military do so.

All this provoked another rebellion within the army in December, 1988, led by Colonel Mohammed Ali Seineldin. After seizing a base near Buenos Aires and demanding that Alfonsín dismiss the army's chief of staff, raise military salaries and grant amnesty to all officers, Seineldin negotiated with his commanders and surrendered to their custody after two days of discussion. A few weeks later, Alfonsín dismissed the army chief of staff, General José Ciarri, but went no further. Seineldin, a brash right winger, is popular with some soldiers less because of his ideology than because of his opposition to the military leadership. Other officers will probably voice their demands from time to time, so Menem is trying to find ways to head them off.

Civilians are not immune to organized violence in Argentina, as they demonstrated on January 23, 1989, when a few dozen individuals surprised the nation by invading the Third Army Regiment based at La Tablada, just outside Buenos Aires. Well-armed, the group, which called itself the Movement for the Fatherland, drove onto the base in cars and trucks and fired on those who resisted them, gaining control over portions of the base until they were routed the next day by armed units. Their affiliation with clandestine organizations on the extreme left was evident, but their motives are still unclear after several months of trials. According to one theory, they feared that officers like Seineldin were about to strike again and implement a coup against the government, so they attacked the base in an attempt to convince other civilians to join them. However, there is no evidence that a coup was contemplated, nor that the attackers were trying to mobilize public opinion. Another theory claims that the civilians were tricked into attacking by the military itself in order to remind Argentines that the armed forces were the only group that pre-

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⁸Buenos Aires Herald, September 17, 1989, p. 2.

⁹Washington Post National Weekly Edition, July 17-23, 1989, p. 15.

¹⁰Buenos Aires Herald, August 13, 1989, p. 3.

elected officials serve as a powerful deterrent. Hundreds of others have received death threats, and many have resigned. In addition, the states of emergency that prevail in more than 30 percent of Peru's provinces complicate the voting process, even though special arrangements are planned to open a window of constitutional "normalcy" around election days.

The dramatic fall-off of incidents and deaths in September and October, 1989, after the grotesque record pace of January through July probably masks the intense preparations being made by both the military and the insurgents to have maximum impact around election time. Elections will take place, but they are likely to be marred by substantial violence, especially where Shining Path has been most active, and they may be impossible to carry out in scores of localities.

Even so, several recent developments may provide more political space than could have been predicted at the beginning of 1989. Modest improvements have occurred in the economic picture, with inflation cut to 25 percent per month, reserves up fourfold to \$1.3 billion and the average wage again advancing in real terms (from about \$30 per month in January to about \$45 per month in September). In addition, the police and military took a more offensive position against the guerrillas between April and July, and are taking delivery of new helicopters and vehicles, restoring some faith in their capacity to protect the system. Furthermore, President García has been more active during his last year in office than was expected after the problems he experienced in late 1988 and early 1989. With the presence of multiple political alternatives at the local level and an emerging conservative alternative at the national level, Peru may well be poised to begin its long climb back from the edge of the abyss. ■

ARGENTINA

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vented leftist insurrection. To date there is no convincing evidence to support either theory.

During his campaign, Menem had promised to consider pardons for everyone—from the junta members who governed in the 1970's to rebels like Seineldin. Nevertheless, he proceeded cautiously, aware that there was opposition to such benevolence. The issue was complicated by the diversity of crimes involved, from torture and murder during the *Proceso*, to launching an ill-conceived war in the Falkland Islands, to rebelling against military and civilian authorities. Moreover, people like former President Jorge Videla made it clear that they

would not accept pardons since they did not believe they had committed any crime.

Two schools of thought within Menem's government quickly emerged on the pardon issue. One argued that pacification of the military was vital to assure peace and to build confidence among foreign investors who were reluctant to spend more money in a country that was plagued by an ineffective military. Others argued that, apart from the obvious, morally repugnant aspects of legal absolution, meddling with the justice system would be frowned on by the liberal democratic governments on which Argentina currently depends for political and economic support. The Radicals were as divided as the Peronists: some favored pardons, while others, including Alfonsín, intensely opposed them.

In October, 1989, Menem began to resolve the difficulty by pardoning almost 280 people. About 40 were retired military officers who had been involved in the *Proceso*; others were participants in the Falklands War or had participated in recent army rebellions. Menem also extended pardons to about 60 civilians, many still in exile, who had been charged with subversion. However, none of the people who took part in the attack at La Tablada were on the list. Eight others, including former Presidents Jorge Videla and Roberto Viola, and Montonero leader Mario Firmenich, were also excluded, but Menem promised that their cases would be reconsidered later in the year. Menem insisted that the pardons were essential to building respect within the armed forces for constitutional government; nevertheless, some Argentines protested against what they considered to be an immoral presidential decision, especially as it applied to those who had exterminated several thousand civilians between 1976 and 1980.¹¹

Exhibiting the same boldness that he had displayed in domestic matters, Menem ended Argentina's embargo on trade with Great Britain (the British had ended their embargo on Argentina in 1985). Even though he reasserted Argentina's claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, Menem agreed to initiate talks with the British in Madrid. Menem's motives were pragmatic: Argentina needs more trade with Europe and that requires better relations with all European nations. Air and sea links between the two countries and between Argentina and the Falklands, fishing rights, and ways to prevent military incidents were also on the agenda for the October 17 meeting. At that meeting, Britain and Argentina renewed diplomatic relations. Menem wanted to convince other nations that Argentina was entering a new era that necessitated fresh responses.

When he went to the United Nations General Assembly meeting in September, 1989, Menem

¹¹ *The New York Times*, October 10, 1989, p. 3.

urged the other heads of state to take a close look at Argentina and at what he was trying to do for the country. In particular, he wanted North Americans "to end an old and stupid legend" about the supposed anti-Americanism of Peronism and to "lift all shadows from relations between the United States and Argentina."¹² When he returned home, he was pleased to report that he had brought with him a new \$1.4-billion stand-by loan from the IMF, a welcome but very temporary solution to Argentina's debt problem.

PROSPECTS

Menem's agenda is ambitious and must be implemented swiftly. Price controls have been tried earlier, but they have always been followed by a renewed acceleration in prices. And not even the armed forces could achieve privatization. Few doubt that Menem wants change in the nation's economic structure, but, as always, most Argentines are skeptical about his chances of success.

During 1990, he must contend with several inevitable obstacles. To begin with, Menem faces a labor movement whose members are frightened by privatization and the unemployment that might accompany it. Moreover, after a decade marked by substantial wage loss, prospects for immediate income recovery do not look bright. One survey recently found that while 60 percent of the Argentine people were optimistic about their future economic improvement in 1985, only 30 percent were optimistic in June, 1989.¹³ Keeping the CGT behind him as adversity grows will not be easy, even for a man elected by the Peronist rank and file, since the CGT is already divided over the role it should play in the new government.

Equally important, Menem must rely on wealthy citizens and private corporations to make the investments that they refused to make during the 1980's. They must return to Argentina some of the \$46 billion that they have sent abroad and they must spend it productively to increase Argentina's exports. Menem has no qualms about firms making profits, but he insists that they must also contribute to the economy. Unfortunately, Argentine entrepreneurs are notoriously cautious about following their government's pleas for long-term investment. They have become creatures of narrow, short-term interests, and no one wants to be the first to change.

Third, there is no way that Argentina will pay very much of its foreign debt any time soon, even with further assistance from the IMF. Trying to do

so would drain the dollar reserves needed to finance development. Argentina can borrow more, but that increases its debt. So far, Menem has approached the debt issue more cautiously than many critics thought he would. Yet if creditors do not yield to Argentina, Menem may become less cooperative.

Fourth, Peronist political power is not so great as it might appear to be. That is why Menem has tried to include many of his potential opponents in his ruling coalition. It is essential that they remain in the coalition until government policy begins to succeed. Otherwise, Argentina will be tossed back into a kind of zero-sum politics that is self-defeating. The Radicals are the government's strongest opponents in Congress and can make life miserable for Menem when he presses for tax and tariff reforms in 1990. Opposition is essential for democracy, but the opposition must offer reasonable and relevant policy alternatives.

Finally, the armed forces, although they pose no immediate threat to democracy, must be reminded constantly of the military's subordinate role. In turn, the civilian government must make a greater effort to understand military organizations and budgets and apply this knowledge more to the armed forces. Otherwise, the military will continue to enjoy the de facto autonomy that makes it so strong. ■

NICARAGUA

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reasons, to release additional political prisoners and to alter procedures for voter registration in line with opposition demands.¹⁶ The government did not meet all the opposition's demands. The voting age remained 16; the victors in the elections would not be inaugurated until January, 1991; the President remained eligible for reelection; and there were no restrictions on FSLN control over the military or restrictions on military voting rights. But in most matters, the opposition achieved its aims, clearing the way for its participation in the elections.

This accord was followed by an agreement between Nicaragua and Honduras and an agreement on the part of all the Central American Presidents that seemed to end the contras' ability to operate out of Honduras. The bilateral agreement involved the suspension of Nicaragua's suit against Honduras before the World Court in return for a Honduran agreement to a "Joint Plan for the Demobilization and Voluntary Repatriation or Relocation of the Nicaraguan Resistance and Their Families." The Central American Presidents, meeting in Tela, Honduras, endorsed the Joint Plan and agreed to

¹²*The New York Times*, September 21, 1989, p. 5.

¹³Edgardo Catterberg, *La Argentina frente a la política: cultura y opinión pública en la transición Argentina a la democracia* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1989).

¹⁶Text of Political Agreement between the President of the Republic of Nicaragua and the Legal Representatives of the Parties, Managua, August 4, 1989.