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## Argentina

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# Officers challenge IMF democracy

by Cynthia Rush

On April 17, just a few days after the government of Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín signed a deal for \$1.9 billion with its international creditor banks, a group of nationalist army officers rebelled against the leadership of Army chief of staff, Gen. Héctor Ríos Erenu. Col. Aldo Rico, a hero of the 1982 Malvinas conflict with Great Britain, traveled to the Campo de Mayo military base in Buenos Aires, took over the Army infantry school with a group of young, nationalist officers, and issued a series of demands to the army leadership regarding treatment of middle-ranking officers charged with human rights violations during the late 1970s "dirty war against subversion."

The international press immediately characterized the uprising as a coup attempt against Alfonsín and rushed to the defense of the three-year-old Radical Party administration. From Santa Barbara, California, the White House issued a statement calling on officers to "desist in their defiant attitude and abide by the law," adding that under Alfonsín, impressive gains "have been made in the consolidation of democracy and the economic development" of the country. The State Department issued hourly bulletins glorifying Alfonsín's "democracy," as did U.S. television stations, and on April 19, Tass news agency happily reported that the attempt to "set the stage for a military coup hatched by reactionary military has come to an inglorious end. . . ."

Alfonsín initially responded with a strident, nationally televised speech on April 17, warning that "our democracy will not be negotiated," and calling on citizens to rally around his government. Over a three-day period, the international press filled its pages with pictures of Argentine citizens in the streets, showing Alfonsín flanked by opposition Peronist leaders who had reportedly gathered to defend his government.

When the conflict was resolved on April 20, columnist William Pfaff wrote in the April 23 edition of the *New York Times*, that "Argentines . . . energetically rejected the rebels and went to the streets to support Alfonsín's government. . . . [T]hese officers . . . are ultra-nationalist, they hate the left. They often make a quasi-mystical ideological amalgam of Argentine nationalism with Christianity and anti-communism. . . . They believe that they are the scapegoat for the atrocities carried out under the military dictator-

ship. . . . They are [Argentina's] most dangerous men."

Why all the hoopla? For the U.S. State Department, and the international banking community, the "danger" represented by the army rebels is not that they are fascist reactionaries; rather, their nationalism, and disgust with Alfonsín over his capitulation to the banks, and trampling on national sovereignty on issues such as the Malvinas, reflects the thinking of much of the population. Colonel Rico has stated privately that he believes that Henry Kissinger's associate, former finance minister José Martínez de Hoz, should be tried for treason, for his role in overseeing both economic policy and military repression between 1976-1981.

In October 1983, 53% of the voting population elected Alfonsín on the belief that he would punish the representatives of the hated "Patria financiera," who quadrupled the country's foreign debt, and destroyed its industrial capabilities during the 1976-83 "Proceso." But, since Alfonsín has pursued exactly the same economic policy as Martínez de Hoz, exacerbating conditions for political and social upheaval, the population is increasingly reluctant to swallow rhetoric about "democracy."

Middle-ranking army officers are enraged at the President's conscious assault on the institution of the armed forces, in which their ranks have been prosecuted on charges of violating human rights during the "war against subversion," while leaving the Martínez de Hoz crowd and its military allies largely unscathed. Colonel Rico and his troops demanded that Alfonsín remove Gen. Ríos Erenu from his post, that a legal limit be placed on the trials of younger army officers, and that a significant portion of the senior officer corps be passed into retirement.

On Easter Sunday, April 19, Alfonsín flew to Campo de Mayo by helicopter to meet personally with Rico, and then returned to waiting crowds outside the presidential palace to announce that an agreement had been reached. The tone of Alfonsín's Sunday speech was far less strident than that of the previous Thursday, and with good reason. After three years of accepting International Monetary Fund policy, and denigrating the armed forces, Alfonsín could negotiate only from a position of weakness. He accepted every demand made by Colonel Rico, quickly replacing Gen. Ríos Erenu, and passing ten generals into retirement. The national courts have postponed any further trials of military officers, pending Supreme Court debate on the issue of whether younger officers were operating on the basis of "due obedience" in carrying out orders of their superiors during the 1970s.

Nor is the crisis over. Observers in Buenos Aires describe the situation as "extremely tense." On April 21, an army engineering unit in the northern province of Salta, and an infantry regiment in neighboring Tucumán, briefly rebelled to protest the naming of the new chief of staff, Gen. José Caridi, known to be associated with the discredited senior officer corps. Caridi has indicated that he may soon retire as well, to be replaced by a younger general, more acceptable to middle-ranking officers.