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Prime Minister

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about the present
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~~(Washington)~~

(Wall Street Journal)

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How Argentine Vengeance Endangers Democracy

By EVERETT G. MARTIN

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina—Given half a chance, Argentines seem to run to excess in everything.

They didn't hesitate, for example, to take on Britain in a war when they decided to make their claim on the Falkland Islands. When they have inflation, it has to become the highest in the world. And when they go into debt, it has to be one of the most troublesome in the world. The list goes on and on, and the list of governments that have been broken trying to contain their excess is just as long.

President Raul Alfonsin hasn't been in office much more than a month and already he is suffering from his countrymen's penchant for overdoing. This time their enthusiasm is directed at democracy.

It is understandable that after more than four decades of authoritarian government of one kind or another, most Argentines have little real idea of what democracy is all about. But it seems that to many of them it means unbridled freedom to do whatever the military governments had forbidden.

Thus some young people clash with police over their demand for total freedom to smoke pot. Publishers rush to print pornographic magazines, and movie theaters are showing all the off-color films they can get their hands on.

For the vast majority of the population, the very fact that they now have an elected president means to them that they can go after the blood of the former military strongmen without any fear of the consequences. With typical celerity, Argentines have switched from massive indifference to

uncontrolled outrage over the crimes that were committed against their legal system and human rights in the 1970s by the military when it was crushing the leftist terrorists. "If Alfonsin hung them all from the lampposts tomorrow, it would be the most popular thing he could do," says a journalist appalled at what she considers to be the hypocrisy of her countrymen.

When the military was fighting the so-called dirty war against the terrorists, the vast majority of Argentines didn't care what methods were used to end the terrorist threat. "Every one of us knew someone who had been kidnapped or whose home was bombed," recalls Guillermo Pena Casares, a prominent Buenos Aires attorney. He says residential areas of the city had been declared "liberated zones" by the *Montonero* terrorists, and neighborhoods formed their own vigilante committees to protect themselves. Argentines genuinely feared they were about to lose their country. "Back then," he says, "people considered the military to be heroes." The antiterrorist war was, in fact, the only real accomplishment the juntas could point to after they botched the economy and were humiliated by the British in the war over the Falkland Islands.

Now, Argentines are wallowing in the horror of what the military did to terrorist suspects. Starting with the noon television news shows, they are glued to their sets every day watching gravediggers exhume bodies from mass graves. The diggers are becoming television personalities and oblige the cameras by holding up the most grisly skulls to show where they were punctured by bullets.

A weekly magazine sold out three printings of a 16-page interview with an ex-navy noncom who claims to have been one of the chief torturers at a secret jail inside the navy mechanics training center. With relish, he spares no details recounting how he cut off the hands of victims and obliterated their teeth to hide their identity and strung the victims together like sausages to be thrown into the sea from airplanes.

When former military President Reynaldo Bignone was called to testify in a court case involving two missing Communist youths, crowds gathered outside the courthouse screaming "Murderer!" and, as they tried to rough him up, clashed with his bodyguards.

A foreign banker stationed in Buenos Aires is amazed at the anger that flashes with every new disclosure of the military's crimes. "When I first came here and mentioned human rights to my secretaries," he recalls, "they looked at me as if I were some kind of Communist. Now they won't talk about anything else."

Such unrestrained public concern, even if long after the fact, is, of course, a healthy thing for Argentina's national soul, but it could turn out as the worst thing possible for the survival of its democracy.

Although Mr. Alfonsin was one of the few Argentines concerned about the military's wholesale violations of legal procedures during the anti-terrorist war, human rights groups, such as *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, now accuse him of trying to protect the torturers. It isn't true, of course. The president was only trying to show his

countrymen that democracy means restraint and to prevent them from committing their usual self-destructive excess.

Mr. Alfonsin and the leaders of his Radical Party haven't forgotten that the biggest threat to the country's fledgling democracy is still a military coup. They want to keep the justifiable outrage over human-rights violations from turning into something the military could view as an assault on the armed forces as an institution.

Mr. Alfonsin has carefully limited his search for the guilty to retired senior officers who have lost most of their influence with military institutions. He has ordered past junta members to be tried by military tribunals, but he has tried to exclude from prosecution men in the lower ranks who he says were only obeying orders.

But the way the situation is going, Mr. Alfonsin's approach may not prevail. Bereaved parents of victims of the military's cruelty are bringing charges against their children's captors in civil courts, and low-ranking servicemen are being called to account outside the military system. Mr. Alfonsin's more moderate approach is threatened with sinking into an orgy of vengeance as the civilian trials proliferate.

One student of Argentine affairs, Carleton College Prof. Gary Wynia, warns that "if individual officers are constantly harassed, the military may panic." And panic in terms of the Argentine military usually means seizing the government.

Mr. Alfonsin may have covered himself against this threat, however. The new top commanders he selected for the army, which is the service to worry about, were picked for their loyalty to the constitution and their lack of any connection with the "dirty war" against the terrorists. This is important because successful Argentine coups in recent years have always been conducted by the high command. Uprisings within individual units have been put down without difficulty.

But the danger is real. In the past 31 years, not a single elected government has served out its full six-year term. Argentines shouldn't forget that, if they choose vengeance, they could well be deciding against their own fragile democracy.