

Argentine crises stay, as Alfonsín bows out

by Cynthia Rush

Claiming that “no President has the right to ask the people to suffer indefinitely,” outgoing President Raúl Alfonsín surprised Argentina on June 12 when he announced on national television that he would resign by June 30, and hand power to the opposition Peronists. Peronist candidate Carlos Saúl Menem won the May 14 presidential elections in a landslide victory.

Alfonsín’s sudden decision, made unilaterally and without consultation with Menem, has added a further degree of chaos to what is already an untenable situation. Together with leaders of the ruling Radical Civic Union (UCR), Alfonsín had been negotiating for weeks with the President-elect over transferring power well before the scheduled date of Dec. 10. Given Argentina’s wild hyperinflationary crisis and financial chaos, spokesmen of every political and business sector agreed that Alfonsín was too discredited to remain in power any longer. Even César Jaroslavsky, UCR whip in the lower house of Congress, reported on June 12 that “it’s just not possible to govern the country under these circumstances.”

Negotiators had tentatively agreed on a date of early August, in the hope that this would give the lame duck President time to deal with a number of unresolved problems, among them the crisis within the armed forces, before exiting the government. Judging from the June 12 announcement, however, Alfonsín has opted to deliberately burden the new administration with a series of crises to make the task of governing as difficult as possible.

Under Argentina’s Constitution, if Alfonsín and his vice president resign, they cannot hand power directly to the President-elect. Instead, the President of the Senate, in this case Menem’s brother, Sen. Eduardo Menem, must assume the presidency as an interim head of state.

A statement issued by Menem following Alfonsín’s announcement termed the President’s decision as “surprising, to say the least,” noting that it was made right in the middle of negotiations on the transfer of power. Menem pointed out that Alfonsín had committed himself to carrying out certain actions prior to resigning, which now cannot be fulfilled, but stated that he is nonetheless willing to assume the presidency “with firmness, realizing that we have the support of the people.” The President-elect stated that the Peronists will announce the content of his government’s economic program

on June 30, when “we will assume government in the worst crisis in history.”

Alfonsín’s policy of paying the foreign debt up through April of 1988, not only caused inflation; together with the International Monetary Fund’s austerity policies, it has produced unprecedented impoverishment of the Argentine people. According to recent statistics, at least 8 million Argentines, out of 30 million, live below poverty levels. Two million are officially unemployed. The minimum wage of 4,000 australs (\$40-50) will only carry the wage-earner, often a head of family, through 20 days of the month, without covering the cost of rent, services, education, health services or clothing. At least half a million workers earn the minimum wage.

Few details on Menem’s plans for a “productive revolution” have yet been released. While Argentina’s devastating crisis demands an aggressive nationalist program, spokesmen have only reported that the new government will grant sharp salary increases, impose tax and public sector reforms, and replace the old currency, the austral, with a new one. There continues to be anxiety expressed among nationalist sectors about the credentials of Menem’s chosen finance minister, Miguel Roig. Roig for many years served as executive vice president of the Soviet-linked grain cartel, Bunge and Born.

Military crisis festers

One of the most serious problems that Alfonsín was supposed to resolve prior to leaving, is the crisis within the armed forces. Alfonsín oversaw the prosecutions of many military officers, charged with human rights violations during the 1970s “war against subversion.” The issue has been a continuing source of unrest among the armed forces. Although much of the military high command has demanded that the government declare an amnesty for those charged, and not prosecute any more officers, Alfonsín refused to act, instead simply delaying and postponing trials until after he leaves office. This means that the issue will be left up to Menem to solve, although it was Alfonsín who adopted the policy of provoking and weakening the armed forces.

The social democratic President also refused to respect the terms of the December 1988 agreement between nationalist Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín and then Army Chief of Staff Gen. Dante Caridi, made following the military action at Villa Martelli base led by Colonel Seineldín. At that time, Alfonsín not only agreed to deal with such pressing issues as military budget, wages, and upcoming trials, but also agreed that no officer other than Colonel Seineldín would be punished for participating in the Villa Martelli action.

Yet, Alfonsín has stood by in recent weeks and watched the military high command impose sanctions on a number of nationalist officers and force others into retirement, in an effort to decapitate this section of the army. Observers describe the situation within the army as “extremely grave.”