

Demilitarization in Argentina: Successes under the Alfonsin Regime

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The Argentine economy is currently in a major crisis with hyperinflation, a severe foreign debt, falling real wages and serious industrial decline. Even so, Argentine public opinion seems to have been more patient with President Alfonsin than it was with the military. Expectations have been lowered by recent political experiences and Alfonsin has taken some strong measures to restore the economy. However, as a democratically elected ruler, he has not found it easy: his performance is a good test for the Latin American structuralist thesis that a mixture of controls and restrictions will reduce inflation without imposing excessive pain on the main social groups.

Initially, it was expected that the Armed Forces would be reduced in size perhaps with an end to compulsory military service. It was generally conceded, however, that it would be much more difficult to end the privileges enjoyed by professional officers, despite the resentment their inflation-proofed salaries and pensions and other benefits generated.

In contrast with previous constitutional leaders, Alfonsin immediately set out to prosecute the military hierarchy for its errors and crimes. Within 1 month he drummed one-half of the generals out of the Army — the only branch that had avoided a post-Malvinas self-purge — and nearly as many admirals and Air Force brigadiers. He then restructured the military high command, abolished the position of Armed Forces' commander-in-chief and brought the three Services under civilian control.

The government also took some symbolic steps to signal a change in the military's mission from internal security to external defense. The senior commander-in-chief, for instance, has been moved to the far south, where tensions occasionally flare with British and Chilean forces, from Buenos Aires, from where many past coup attempts have been launched. Alfonsin also indicated that he wanted to slash defense expenditures from 5% of GNP to 2%. Initially the government's

personnel reductions for 1984 were to total 12%, with a programmed 40% cut in 1984 military spending. These measures, however, prompted criticism that the relatively small 1984 personnel cuts would result in under-trained and underequipped conscripts, and the goal of professionalizing the services first needed modernization. Budget constraints were already tighter by the discovery of tens of millions of dollars in arms contracts already in the pipeline ordered by the military regime to replace material lost in the Malvinas war, and to preempt the expected cuts in arms budgets by the incoming civilian regime.

The military establishment spent some US\$20 billion in 1976–1980. Ministry of Economy figures show a 200% increase in the military budget in real terms from 1972 to 1980. Defense expenditures by the post-1976 military regime increased to 8% of GDP — against an average of 2.2–2.5% under the VCR and Peronist governments. Unofficial estimates of the cost of the Malvinas war are about \$850 million. By the end of 1982, more than \$1 billion in arms purchases had been committed.

Argentina's military build up following the Malvinas War has been characterized as "careful and sophisticated". As of 1985, the Air Force had an enhanced strike potential; its 80-strong Mirage/Dagger force has increased their operational range; the Naval Air Force has modified seven Lockheed L-188 aircraft for reconnaissance and antisubmarine roles; and there are plans to increase its submarines from two to eight, and modern escort-destroyers, frigates and corvettes from 5 to 15.

Budgeted military spending in Argentina in 1984 and 1985 still, therefore, reflected the war economy of 1982. Even if some of the more recent orders could be reduced or cancelled, the bill has yet to be paid for the 1970s rearmament program and the aftermath of the Malvinas conflict. The Central Bank estimated early in 1983 that at least \$5 billion in foreign

debt had been incurred for arms purchases between 1978 and the end of 1982, and that the figure was still growing.

By April 1984, President Alfonsín seemed to be retracting his plans to slash military spending up to 20%. At the time the Defence Minister indicated that the military budget would be characterized by a reallocation rather than a reduction, the rationale being that security should not be affected.

How far President Alfonsín has been willing to curtail the military budget and reform the services became clear in the draft budget of 1984. The service chiefs claimed they would be quite constrained if the budget were passed. Despite these misgivings, they appeared willing to go along with the reduced 1984 budget, rationalizing it as a transitional situation while plans are drawn up for a new defense structure. On 20 October 1984, Alfonsín signed a decree dissolving several Forces' installations and introducing civilian control over Fabricaciones Militares and the country's airports.

The proposed Beagle Channel treaty with Chile was put to a referendum in November 1984 and resulted in a strong vote of approval; the vote can also be construed at the time as an expression of confidence in the government and a warning to the military that the public strongly supported the Alfonsín administration, despite its economic and other difficulties.

A recent study of the Argentinian military since the Malvinas War revealed that the number of soldiers conscripted annually had declined by 30% (to around 30,000–40,000 in 1985, and that few of them will serve beyond the 180-day minimum period allowed by law. It also appears that a complete replacement of war losses may not occur. The government is adamant that only orders placed before the democracy was reestablished have been delivered. By 1983–1984, the defense budget had been cut from 8% before the war to 5.98% of GDP. Under a civilian Defence Minister, the defense budget has fallen to 3.71% of GDP,

and Alfonsin has indicated he hopes to cut defense still further, perhaps down to a mere 2%.

These massive blows have been felt throughout the Forces' operational and training activities but nowhere more than in the Forces' weapons development programs. The vast military complex at Campo de Mayo is being reduced by over two thirds in area. Land and facilities are to be sold, as are many other valuable properties and facilities held by the forces, particularly the Army. With a defense budget today half that of 1983, it is not surprising that Argentina's suppliers are beginning to complain about delays in payment.

One of the main provisions of the September 1984 IMF agreement was that military expenditure should be reduced, and spending on social services, health, housing and education increased. The current economic situation of increased austerity, together with the Radicals' resolve to cut military spending, should result in additional real budgetary cutbacks. Alfonsin's success in demilitarizing Argentina holds open hope for other military regimes in Latin America which are approaching democracy, and making possible major cutbacks in the share of resources allocated for defense purposes elsewhere.
