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Argentine Tightrope

The key to democratic revival in Latin America may be held by Raul Alfonsin, the civilian president of Argentina, who has been able to stand up to the army and yet stay in office without a military coup.

The ouster of the Argentine military dictatorship in 1983 was followed by a return to democratic rule in neighboring Brazil and Uruguay. But unfortunately, Argentina's status as a democratic trend-setter is endangered by its precarious finances. Alfonsin inherited an economy on the edge of ruin; he is now forced to build his career on the multiplication of debts.

He has mastered the practical art of politics and has become the embodiment of the general will in Argentina. The people see in him a leader who can bring about the regeneration of their country.

Yet he is hobbled by vulnerabilities inherited from past military rulers. With a treasury barely kept afloat by alms cadged from other nations and an army unaccustomed to taking orders from a civilian, he has to lead not from strength but by political sleight-of-hand, crowd-enrapturing orations and alliances with irreconcilable interests.

Somehow he has to sustain a momentum of hope—an atmosphere of business booming, of workers working, of opportunity stirring. He cannot make it economically without massive aid. This will require sacrifices, in return, from the people. Yet he cannot make it politically unless he improves their standard of living. This leaves him on a tightrope, simultaneously needing the applause of the populace and the approval of Argentina's creditors.

We had a private meeting with Alfonsin during his recent visit to Washington and found him affable, articulate and unafraid of tough questions. Asked about the new wave of democracy that started in Argentina, Alfonsin disclaimed credit. "We do not attribute it to ourselves," he said. "What has happened is that the experience of the totalitarian governments has been tragic, and the people have reacted against that. It is a great hope for Latin America."

What about the danger of a military coup during this period of rampant inflation and general economic turmoil in Argentina? "There is no such danger," Alfonsin said firmly. "I'm convinced that we have inaugurated a democratic epoch for Argentina."

For the record, of course, the Argentine president cannot admit any doubts. But privately, we were told, he is concerned about a military command that hasn't hesitated in the past to overthrow the government at gunpoint.

Other civilians have been elected to power in Argentina, but few have been allowed to stay for long. "The next four months," said a senior official, "are going to be the hardest."

As a civil rights lawyer who embarrassed the military juntas for years, Alfonsin promised to bring to justice those responsible for the "dirty war" against suspected leftists. That's exactly what is about to happen. Top members of the last three military juntas will soon come to trial for their part in the "dirty war."

The big question is: Will the army stand for this? According to our intelligence sources, Alfonsin may actually have prevented a military coup by his determination to prosecute the alleged criminals.

"Most military officers are willing to accept the top echelon being punished," one U.S. analyst told our associate Michael Binstein. But he added this caveat: "They're more worried that Alfonsin might go down into the ranks" in the search for war criminals.

If the Argentine courts were to pursue the small fry who were following orders, it would decimate the armed services as an institution. And before that process got very far, the military would unite in self-defense and seize power again, the intelligence analyst predicted.

The military's strongest political weapon against Alfonsin, meanwhile, is Argentina's \$45 billion debt and the economic problems that prevent paying it. Never mind that the debt was run up by the military juntas.

"[The military] takes advantage of the problem of the debt, the problem of agriculture and the falling of salaries," explained the senior Argentine official.

The only way Argentina can pay off the debt, Alfonsin told us, is through increased exports. But the country's chief export is agricultural products, and these markets are being closed all over the world.

The United States has not hesitated to support military dictatorships, oil monarchies, even radical, anti-Western regimes when it has seemed in the national interest to do so. It will be interesting to see how far the great thinkers and planners in Washington will go to support a fragile democracy that could set an example for all Latin America.