

David Pion-Berlin

THROUGH  
CORRIDORS  
OF  
POWER

Institutions and Civil-Military  
Relations in Argentina

The Pennsylvania State University Press  
University Park, Pennsylvania

# Contents

List of Tables and Figures	ix
Preface	xi
List of Abbreviations	xvii
1. Introduction	1
2. Institutions, Policy, and Civil-Military Relations	13
3. The Changing Political Landscape in Argentina	45
4. Settling Scores: Human Rights Gains and Setbacks Under Alfonsín	75
5. Trimming the Fat: Military Budget-Cutting Successes Under Democratic Rule	107
6. Forgoing Change: The Failure of Defense Reform Under Democratic Rule	141
7. Argentina's Neighbors: Institutions and Policy in Uruguay and Chile	179
8. Conclusion	213
Selected Bibliography	223
Index	235

# Preface

Argentina has often been thought of despairingly. It is a nation of great expectations and potential, but also one of unfulfilled hope and missed opportunities. It is a place that seemed to have so much going for it during the first half of the twentieth century, only to see it squandered during the second half. Development specialists have despaired over Argentina's inability to take advantage of its enormous size, fertile land, abundant resources, and skilled work force to place itself on the path to modernization. And political scientists have bemoaned its self-destructive conflict, violence, and repression that have denied the country any long-term stability.

Few countries of Latin America—or any region for that matter—were so plagued for so long by persistent, uncontrolled, and unresolved confrontations between social classes, pressure groups, movements, governments and their opposition. Whether it be students, unionized labor, political parties, guerrillas, or the armed forces, organized interests of one kind or another observed no limits to their conduct, resorting to whatever means they had at their disposal. From 1948 to 1977, Argentina ranked (among 125 countries) 22 in political riots, 19 in protest demonstrations and armed attacks, 7 in politically motivated strikes, and 2 in assassinations.<sup>1</sup> Between 1970 and 1975, left-wing guerrilla groups roamed through city and countryside, staging abductions of businessmen, robbing banks, and making daring, deadly, though ultimately futile assaults on police and military installations. Their terror induced a far greater counterterror, as the armed forces seized and held control of the state between 1976 and 1983, visiting upon society (combatants and noncombatants alike) unprecedented hostilities and acts of cruelty that left tens of thousands of victims in their wake.

1. Charles L. Taylor and David Jodice, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, 3d ed., vol. 2, *Political Protest and Government Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 22, 30, 33, 39, 44.

All of this conflict and violence took their toll on regimes, especially democratic ones. From 1955 to 1976, power changed hands seven times between democratic and military regimes. No elected leader was able to serve out his full term of office, each one falling prey to a military-led coup. Democracy, its leaders, and its institutions always lived precariously in Argentina. To its citizens and to those outsiders who came to observe the nation during its periods of political competitiveness, it seemed as if the system were teetering on the edge, about to fall into the abyss.

It was in this context that I took my first research trip to Argentina in 1984 just eight months after the election of President Raúl R. Alfonsín. The skeptic in me didn't give his democracy much chance of succeeding. How could it, with so much history of political upheaval behind it? I met with former members of the military regime who, rather than showing remorse for what they had done, seemed intent on justifying their disastrous political and economic policies. And I met with civilians who, while hopeful the military would stay out of politics, still worried about what the future held in store for their country.

A decade later something had changed. The mere passage of time itself was noteworthy since the democracy had survived intact. In the interim, power had been transferred peacefully between one elected president and another—a first since 1928. The society that like most others in the region had suffered greatly during the deep economic depression of the 1980s resisted calls for military intervention in order to somehow set the economy straight. Whereas only a few years before trouble over their shrinking budgets and the ongoing human rights trials had caused some army officers to rebel against their senior commanders, their actions never triggered any full-scale coup attempts. Although still burdened with unresolved problems, this new Argentina seemed more settled than the old.

I was in Buenos Aires for the fourth time, busily conducting interviews and digging up documents for this book. While there, I spoke to a distinguished gathering of defense specialists to convey my thoughts about civil-military affairs. My audience seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say yet perturbed that I had focused on the conflictual elements of the relation. For them conflict was a thing of the past. The armed forces were now compliant with democratic authority, they said. These experts were more concerned with and eager to talk about unifying themes, such as defense modernization, regional security, or Argentina's role in international peace-keeping missions.

Undoubtedly, the views of this audience reflected some wishful thinking

or avoidance as much as sober reflection about Argentina's political realities. But then again, there may be something to their newfound air of optimism. My own research was uncovering evidence that suggested to me not that civilian control over the armed forces had been achieved, or that conflict had been eliminated, but rather that contact between soldiers and politicians had been routinized. Disputes over policy persisted but were now resolved within the confines of democratic institutions. The unbridled confrontations of the past had given way to more restrained interactions governed by organizational rules of conduct. There was, it seemed to me, a new stability to the Argentine civil-military relation. If this were true, it would represent substantial progress in and of itself.

Probing this idea required that I take a much closer look at the operation of government than civil-military specialists are normally accustomed to doing. There is a "military centric" thrust to much of the literature that confines itself to analyses of the institution of the armed forces—its history, structure, interests, strategies, and links to society—to the exclusion of the governing civilian side of the equation. In this study I try to tilt the balance the other way by viewing civil-military relations through the prism of democratic government and its policymaking machinery. This book, then, is devoted to an examination of politicians and soldiers seeking to advance their own interests by moving through official channels. It is an account of how their policy gains and setbacks may have much to do with the organizational features of government they encounter along the way. While the focus is on Argentina, comparisons are made with two other Southern Cone states, Uruguay and Chile.

A number of organizations made my investigative journeys easier and more productive. Travel to Argentina in 1993 and 1994 was made possible by grants from the American Philosophical Society, the Institute for Global Cooperation and Conflict, and the University of California at Riverside (UCR). Field work in Chile and Uruguay was fully supported with a Fulbright Scholar Award under the 1994/1995 American Republics Research Program. While in the Southern Cone, I had the good fortune to be hosted by several distinguished research centers. I associated briefly with the Argentine Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad (CEDES), which provided me with comfortable work surroundings. The Chilean Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo (CED) and the Uruguayan Centro Latinoamericano de Economía Humana (CLAEH) furnished me with the same kind of environment, in addition to being quite helpful in arranging interviews.

Ultimately, it was the individuals I met and befriended along the way who

made the real difference. It was they who by sharing with me their vast knowledge about their own homelands were able to ground my understandings in context. It was they who by introducing me to their own places of work and to their own associates were able to widen my network of contacts. A special debt of gratitude goes out to Ernesto López. As a friend, co-author, and leading authority on civil-military affairs, he generously and repeatedly gave of himself and his time to help me make sense of the enigmatic Argentina. My long association and many conversations with José Manuel Ugarte were also invaluable. He introduced me to former members of the Radical Party government and to members of Congress, and arranged easy access to all the relevant legislation I ever needed. Among the many other people in Argentina who aided my research endeavors in various ways I must mention Luis Tibiletti, Rut Diamint, Thomas Scheetz, Eduardo Estevez, Eduardo Stafforini, José Luis Manzano, and the late Carlos Nino. Aaron Cytrynblum was kind enough to allow me to peruse the newspaper archives at *Clarín* and then *Página Doce*. The countless individuals who agreed to be interviewed cannot be mentioned here by name, but their willingness to put up with my incessant questioning was greatly appreciated.

Before my departure to Chile, Gisela von Muhlenbrock placed her numerous contacts with former justice ministry officials at my disposal, and I am grateful to her for that. While in Chile, my work could not have proceeded as smoothly as it did without the invaluable help of Hugo Frühling. And the assistance I received from the archivists at the Chilean weekly *Hoy* was always friendly and prompt. In Uruguay, Gerardo Caetano, Romeo Pérez Anton, and the entire staff at CLAEH made my trip a more enjoyable and productive one. Cynthia Farrell de Johnson of the United States embassy in Montevideo placed me in touch with some key air force officers. And Juan Rial graciously responded to all my queries. Back in the United States I spent a few weeks in the summer of 1994 at the Hispanic Division of the U.S. Library of Congress. Special thanks goes out to its head of reference, Everette E. Larson, who showed me some computer shortcuts to the documents I was looking for. The Law Division of the Library of Congress was also helpful, as was the Foreign and International Section of the Los Angeles County Law Library.

Writing a book requires a considerable amount of unstructured time away from the classroom and from administrative assignments. I am grateful to the Department of Political Science at the UCR for providing that time by granting me a sabbatical leave in the fall of 1993 and to Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, for

approving a paid leave for me the following fall as well. The writing benefited immensely from the detailed comments of J. Samuel Fitch and Deborah Norden, both of whom read through the entire manuscript. Karen Remmer, Brian Loveman, Claude Welch Jr., Wendy Hunter, Paul Buchanan, Alison Brysk, and Craig Arceneaux reviewed specific chapters, and all had useful suggestions for revision. The production of the book went smoothly thanks to Sandy Thatcher and his staff at Penn State University Press. I thank them all, knowing full well that any errors of commission or omission in the writing are mine alone.

Finally, there are families to thank. In Buenos Aires my distant cousins made me feel part of their extended family. Julio and Regina Hubscher welcomed me into their home, giving me a place to rest my weary bones after a long day of interviews. They also provided me with good company and conversation, as did Roberto and Rut Hubscher. Back in Claremont my wife Lisa stood by me throughout the long period of research and writing. She was a source of constant encouragement, even while enduring my long absences from home. And our children, Jeremy and Emma, have helped me in more intangible ways than they could ever imagine.