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Argentina

Argentina: Grappling With Intelligence Reform

When President Alfonsin took office in December 1983 he inherited a chaotic intelligence apparatus whose mission and mind-set was out of step with Argentina's new democratic system. The President soon made clear in public statements that he had little confidence in these services and would make intelligence reform a priority. Alfonsin began several reforms, but military resistance to change and a lack of capable intelligence officials loyal to the government have hampered these initiatives. Moreover, a string of scandals has raised charges of corruption and incompetence and reinforced the public's conviction that Alfonsin does not fully control the intelligence services. The President is now trying to reorganize the intelligence community and has proposed legislation that would severely restrict the military's autonomy. We believe, however, that military intransigence and civilian weakness will frustrate efforts at change and that the military intelligence services in all likelihood will continue to serve their own interests—rather than those of the elected government—for the remainder of Alfonsin's term.

A Tarnished Image

Argentina's many intelligence services (see inset) enjoyed favored status under the 1976-83 military government. According to academic and press accounts, the services operated virtually independently of the military junta, seldom coordinated their activities or shared information, and frequently tried to discredit and sabotage one another. Testimony from ongoing military trials indicates that all the services committed human rights abuses during the "dirty war" against terrorism, and heavy press coverage of the court proceedings has reinforced the public's negative opinion of the intelligence community.

Civilian Services. Alfonsin announced publicly early in his administration that cleanup of the intelligence services would be high on his agenda. The President used charges that the civilian intelligence service,

SIDE, had conducted illegal surveillance of Argentine legislators to justify a purge of all senior staff officers with military rank or who had been appointed during military rule. he replaced many key officials with loyalists from his own Radical Civic Union who would represent administration interests and implement reforms. These moves, in our view, enhanced Alfonsin's control over SIDE, but did so at the cost of the service's professionalism. many career officers resented the appointment of inexperienced individuals to senior positions and resigned from the service.

We believe that these losses gutted SIDE's operational capability and left Alfonsin with no dependable, nonmilitary, source of intelligence. Alfonsin tried to fill this breach by organizing his own parallel intelligence organizations. he established extraofficial groups within the Ministries of Defense and the Interior that operated for roughly two years before being exposed in a scandal referred to by some Argentine political commentators as Alfonsin's "Watergate."

The case hit the Buenos Aires' headlines early this year when relatives of real estate magnate and kidnap victim Osvaldo Sivak alleged that elements within SIDE and the Federal Police had inadequately investigated his case and extorted ransom money from the family. Heavy press coverage forced Alfonsin to order an investigation that subsequently revealed the involvement of members of his parallel groups, according to the US Embassy. This evidence unleashed a deluge of criticism from the opposition; Congress demanded that Interior Minister Troccoli and then Defense Minister Lopez explain these

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Argentine Intelligence Services

State Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE) . . . serves as central repository for internal/external intelligence . . . [REDACTED]

. . . directly responsible to the President. [REDACTED]

Army Intelligence Service (SIE) . . . reports directly to Army General Staff and Ministry of Defense . . . its staff [REDACTED] is the largest in the military services. [REDACTED]

. . . all intelligence is reported to the Military Intelligence Collection Center (CRIM)—formerly the 601st Army battalion—which has responsibility for processing the information. [REDACTED]

Air Force Intelligence Service (SIFA) . . . reports directly to Air Force General Staff and Ministry of Defense . . . operates through officers within Argentina and attaches abroad . . . [REDACTED]

Navy Intelligence Service (SIN) . . . reports directly to Navy General Staff and Ministry of Defense. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] worst record of human rights abuses during the dirty war. [REDACTED]

Superintendency of the Interior . . . reports to Federal Police and the Ministry of Interior . . . main central repository of criminal information . . . responsible for enforcing all federal laws . . . under National Defense Law, will assume internal intelligence collection duties from military. [REDACTED]

Naval Prefecture Intelligence Service . . . reports to Naval Prefecture (roughly equivalent of US Coast Guard) and Ministry of Interior. [REDACTED]

Gendarmerie Intelligence Directorate . . . reports to National Gendarmerie (border police) and the Ministry of the Interior. [REDACTED]

irregularities. The Embassy reports that Troccoli weathered the storm largely because of extensive support from Radical Party leaders, but that Lopez resigned to protest what he called the administration's mishandling of the affair. [REDACTED]

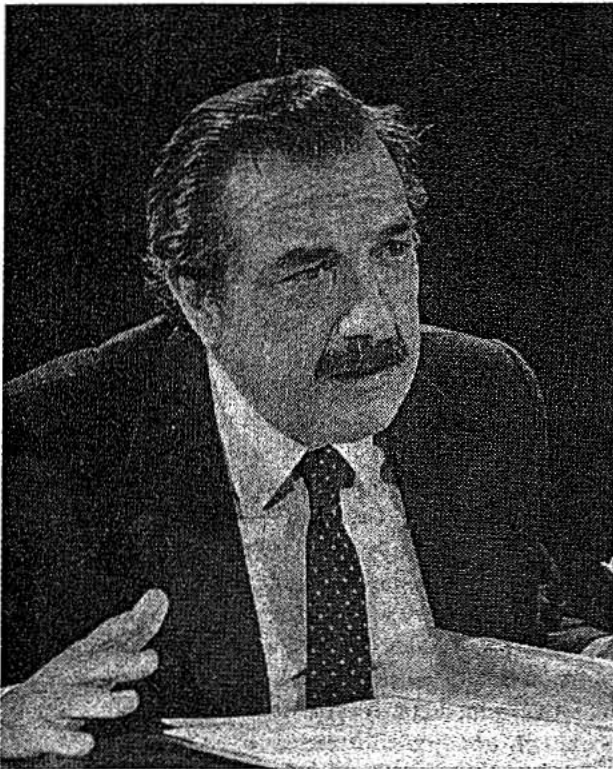
Other scandals have also damaged the civilian service's reputation. A SIDE officer accused of involvement in the 1983 kidnaping of an Argentine magazine editor, for example, easily eluded law enforcement officials and escaped to Spain, according to US Embassy and press reports. Chagrined SIDE officials subsequently urged Alfonsin to negotiate his extradition with Madrid. The Embassy reports, however, that SIDE was unable to provide the evidence necessary to convict him when he returned to Buenos Aires, causing the courts to release him. [REDACTED]

Finally, another case that is now unfolding in the Argentine press reveals that at least one of Alfonsin's political appointees was a traitor. The SIDE officer, named to a post in Geneva in 1983, recently vanished; the government has accused him of selling SIDE codes to the British, according to the US Embassy. This scandal cast doubt on Alfonsin's judgment and led to a round of public name calling among Radical Party officials. Former Defense Minister Lopez publicly denounced the head of SIDE for covering up the case, the SIDE chief blamed Lopez for appointing the accused, and both pointed the finger at Alfonsin. [REDACTED]

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A series of intelligence community scandals has forced Alfonsín to step up his lagging reorganization plan. [REDACTED] The Economist ©

Military Intelligence. Although overshadowed in the press by SIDE's blunders, the military services have been implicated in several scandals, according to Embassy and defense attache reporting. In September 1985, a wave of terrorist bombings afflicted Argentina. The government—advised by SIDE that extremist elements within the military were trying to foment trouble prior to the November elections—arrested six active duty and retired officers for masterminding the violence. Although evidence against the alleged perpetrators was inconclusive and they were eventually released, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] tended to substantiate SIDE's contention that elements within military intelligence had engineered at least some of the bombings to give the impression that Alfonsín was not in complete control of the country. [REDACTED]



Interior Minister Troccoli was called to testify in Congress on the SIVAK case. Only a show of support from Radical Party leaders kept him in office. [REDACTED]

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There is other evidence of military intelligence's uncertain loyalty to Alfonsín. In May of this year, police discovered a bomb along Alfonsín's route to visit an Army headquarters in Cordoba. Press reports indicate that Army intelligence carried out a cursory investigation, after which military officials publicly implied that the incident was only a mildly dangerous

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A failure by military intelligence to identify those responsible for an attempt on Alfonsin's life has raised serious questions about its loyalty to the government. Buenos Aires Herald

prank. The Cordoba corps commander resigned rather than comply with the administration's demands that he identify the perpetrators.

the military then alleged that the bomb was the brainchild of Radical Party leaders who wanted to use the incident to justify a purge of the Cordoba corps—a longtime locus of antidemocratic activities. Several courts continue to investigate the case, but the US Embassy reports that, as with last year's bombings, convictions are unlikely.

Democratizing the Intelligence Services

The Embassy reports that Alfonsin is extremely sensitive to public and Congressional criticism of the intelligence services. He has publicly acknowledged the need to coordinate and control intelligence activities to avoid future "operational disorders," and

He is also promoting a National Defense bill—currently being debated in the Senate—aimed, in part, at defining the responsibilities of each service and establishing checks on their activities. The most controversial provision of the bill, in our view, gives civilian authorities sole responsibility for domestic intelligence activities and restricts the military services to foreign and strategic matters. In our view, Alfonsin hopes that this division of intelligence functions will limit the influence of any one service.

The proposed law addresses the issue of accountability by centralizing authority over the entire intelligence community in a single government agency, the National Intelligence Center (CNI). The head of the CNI—appointed by, and directly responsible to, the President—would coordinate all intelligence tasking, collection, and processing. The government has not yet determined the exact structure of the CNI,

The Military Response

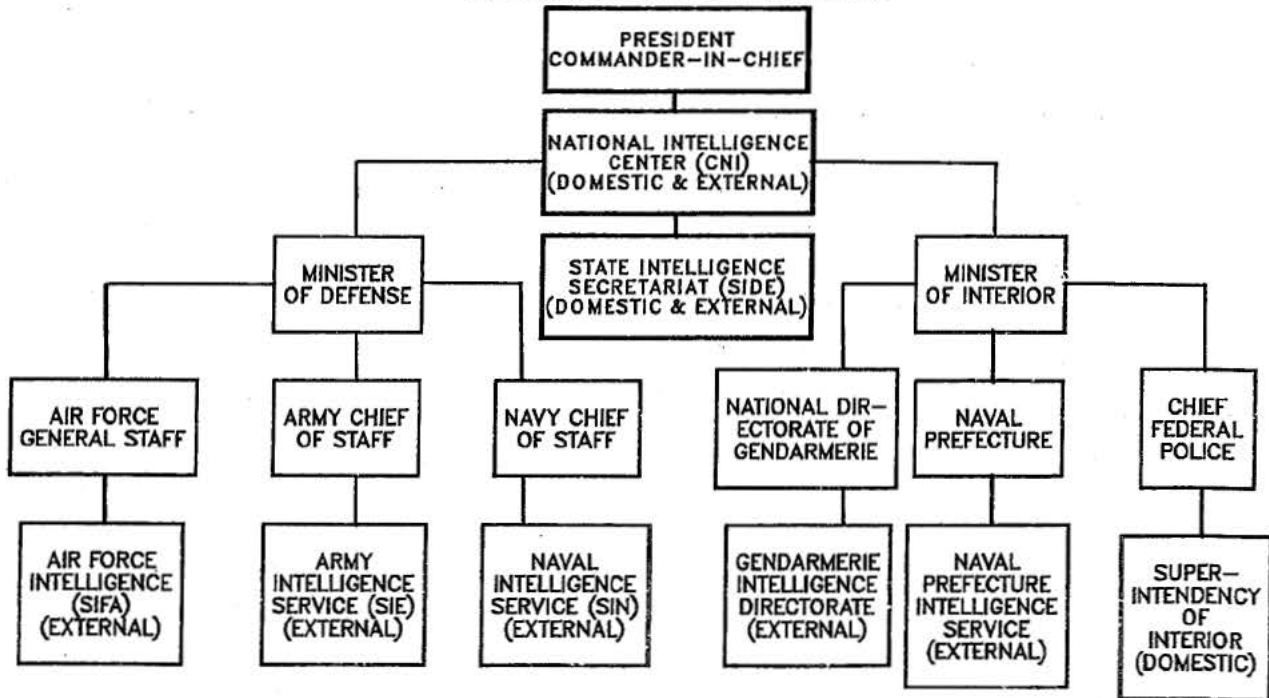
We believe that the armed forces are the biggest obstacle to lasting reform of the intelligence community. The civilian intelligence agencies, in our view, are at present too weak and ineffective to take over the duties currently performed by the military services. Moreover, many midlevel SIDE and Federal Police officials would even welcome subordination to the military, hoping that it would restore some of their professionalism.

Military intelligence chiefs resent the administration's attempts to alter their role and organization and oppose Alfonsin's efforts to subordinate them to elected authorities. most military officers have little respect for Alfonsin's

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ARGENTINA: PROPOSED INTELLIGENCE SERVICE ORGANIZATION
AND COLLECTION RESPONSIBILITIES



civilian appointees, citing their lack of experience in intelligence matters and the litany of errors they have committed as evidence of their incompetence. More fundamentally, the military—and especially its intelligence branches—in our view, has pledged only conditional loyalty to democratic rule. It remains primarily concerned with protecting its institutional interests and countering leftist influence, not with protecting the still fragile Argentine constitutional system.

the proposal to give civilian agencies sole responsibility for domestic collection has become the rallying point for the military's resistance to Alfonsín's reforms. military leaders met recently to coordinate a lobbying campaign to persuade the Senate to alter this provision of the defense law. Although they are confident they can muster the support they need,


several of the chiefs indicated that they will continue to collect domestic intelligence even if legally prohibited from so doing.

Finally, longstanding rivalries between the services are fueling opposition to reform. Alfonsín's proposed changes call for the intelligence agencies to share information and coordinate data processing. The services, however, have historically been pitted against one another by military governments and the resulting mistrust permeates them as they scramble to protect well-established and hard-won power bases.


any supposed favoritism Alfonsín displays toward one of the services quickly prompts the others to demand equal treatment. For example, when the press reported that


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the Air Force Chief of Staff had presented an intelligence reform plan to the President, the Army and Navy chiefs quickly countered with their own proposals. 

Outlook

In our view, problems over intelligence reform are likely to plague Alfonsin for the remainder of his term. The Senate probably will decide to water down the provisions for civilian control in the National Defense bill, leaving the military with substantial responsibility for domestic collection. We believe that, under these conditions, the military—with its antidemocratic ethos and adversarial view of the Alfonsin government—will continue to place a low priority on monitoring the activities of antigovernment rightwing extremists, and may on occasion, even abet these activities. 

Senate passage of the intelligence reforms as they now stand would not substantially improve the situation either, in our view. Under such circumstances, the military probably would continue its domestic operations illegally, while the President would be forced to rely on SIDE and the Federal Police—services of proven ineffectiveness—for internal intelligence. The President's only option would be to risk more scandals by once again organizing extraofficial groups to keep tabs on civilian extremists and the military's political activities. 

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