

2nd Quarter, 2003

One Year After Pot-Banging Argentines Threw Out Their President, How Much Has Changed?

Buenos Aires - In December, 2001, Argentina erupted in protest against prevailing economic policies and massively discredited politicians. On December 19, amid widespread looting and outrage against the government's freezing of bank accounts, then-President Fernando de la Rúa announced a state of emergency that suspended all constitutional rights and guarantees.

Immediately, spontaneous throngs of pot-banging protestors paraded through the streets in a furious *cacerolazo* and didn't stop until both de la Rúa and his Economy Minister, Domingo Cavallo, had resigned. During the looting and protests 32 people were killed, seven near the historic Plaza de Mayo. What made the events so different and historic was the absolute lack of a convoking organization. And rather than a military overthrow, the people ousted their president.

What is the state of affairs one year after this momentous uprising?

Marta Ocampo de Vásquez is a founder of the white-kerchiefed Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who boldly confronted the last dictatorship. To this day they demand the return of their children—and all of the 30,000 disappeared Argentines.

“Look at the economic plan they left us with,” she said. “A country with such wealth—the granary of the world—and people are dying of hunger! Until recently we said that 100 children died per day from malnutrition, but today we'd have to increase that number.”

After four years of economic recession, 45 percent of working-age Argentines are unemployed or under-employed. More than half the people live in poverty and one in four is indigent. In 2002, the economy shrank by approximately 11 percent.

When seven-day President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá took office on December 23, 2001, he announced that Argentina would default on its public debt (except that owed to multilateral lenders). Current President Eduardo Duhalde then took the giant and perhaps equally inevitable step of ending eleven years of peso-dollar parity by devaluing the peso.

Nonetheless, Duhalde's policies have been “business as usual.” His only economic strategy has been to wait endlessly for a new agreement from the IMF. There is no plan to increase public spending nor to create new jobs. On the contrary, the IMF has imposed cuts in public spending as a precondition for

further loans—a stark contrast to President Bush 's \$307 billion deficit spending to stimulate the U.S. economy.

Still, there are reasons for optimism. Argentina has enormous productive capacity, significant commercial and current-accounts surpluses, and formidable human and natural resources. The risk of post-devaluation hyperinflation has passed, and in December 2002 most banking restrictions were lifted with no run on the banks or on dollars.

Furthermore, in late 2002 the economic freefall appeared to be slowing—*without* an IMF agreement. Third quarter 2002 growth was 1.5 percent (compared to *negative* first quarter growth of 16.3 percent) and exports increased. It is too early to say that the economy is in recovery, but these are encouraging signs.

Soon after failing to make a series of payments to the World Bank, the IMF came through with the fervently-desired agreement after all—though the January 24, 2003 document merely postpones payments coming due through August 2003. In return, Argentina agreed to controversial measures such as further budget cuts, increases in taxes and utility rates, and initial steps to privatize public banks.

Meanwhile, the longstanding rupture between citizens and the three branches of government has only widened. Argentines of all political stripes now debate the catchphrase from last December's protests, "*Que se vayan todos*" (roughly "Out with all of them," meaning all politicians). Polls have shown 85 percent support for its literal implementation.

Politics are often laced with violence. On March 1, 2003, Peronist Congressman Luis Barrionuevo made good on promises to unleash violence to halt elections for governor of the province of Catamarca after the courts prohibited his candidacy. President Duhalde—also a Peronist—has been silent regarding these events. Marta Vásquez said, "The democracy of the mafia,' that's what you could call this."

Argentina's Supreme Court—the ultimate guarantor of citizen's rights—is precariously weak. Among other aberrations, the Supreme Court justices allegedly blackmailed President Duhalde to prevent impeachment proceedings against them.

According to Victor Abramovich, Director of the *Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales*, "The members of the court have severed their link to society. People no longer trust the justice system because they believe that it is corrupt and responds to individual interests," he said.

The Court is reportedly poised to uphold the constitutionality of “Final Point” and “Due Obedience,” the “laws of impunity” that represented a colossal set-back for the prosecution of human rights violations committed during the last dictatorship.

However, human rights violations in Argentina are not just a phenomenon of the past. In particular, police violence continues to go unchecked and unpunished. Torture of suspects and prisoners is endemic, and journalists are frequent victims of police aggression.

Marta Vásquez said, “The events of December 19 and 20 [2001] show the impunity with which the police act.” Victor Abramovich added, “In the repression of the 19th and 20th we see police practices that are linked to those of the dictatorship.”

On December 29, 2001, an off-duty police officer shot dead three youth point-blank after they jeered at television images of police being beaten by protestors. On June 26, 2002, police killed two unarmed, unemployed protestors at close range during a protest. On September 20, 2002, unidentified gunmen shot at the home of Estela de Carloto, president of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, in what she took to be an attempt on her life.

Marta Vásquez added that Argentines are also experiencing massive violations of their economic, social and cultural rights. “I would say this is the second genocide they are committing,” she said, “and it, too, should be considered a crime against humanity.”

What you can do:

The Jubilee USA Network, a coalition of labor, churches, religious communities and institutions, and individuals which began in 1997, is running an ongoing campaign to relieve poor countries of their debt burden in order to make more money available for basic services like health care and education. To learn more about the campaign or to get involved, see www.jubileeusa.org.

Commend the State Department for releasing in August 2002 more than 4,670 declassified documents about human rights abuses during the last dictatorship, many of which are highly relevant to cases under investigation in Argentine courts.

General Assembly

Economic Rights: Pressing Problems in Argentina

In 1998, Argentina continued to impose very drastic economic policies. The middle-class experienced a decrease in power, and is very dissatisfied with the government. So great has been the middle-class disapproval of the policies of

the present administration that the incumbent president was not reelected for another term in office.

Many residents of Argentina have indicated that common crimes of thievery and violence increased during the course of the year. This illegal activity has aggravated many of the social problems in this region. For example: many of the citizens of Argentina are not able to eat adequately; benefits for children are limited; and the retired elderly continue to claim that they cannot survive on their current benefits. The Mothers of Plaza 5 de Mayo continue to protest on behalf of their missing families who disappeared during the dirty war of the 1970s. This has produce[d] harassment against them from members of the military. (*Minutes*, 1999, Part I, pp. 468-469)

*By Martha Farmelo
For Latin America Working Group*