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President Kirchner Revamps Military Leadership

by LADB Staff

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Nestor Kirchner took office May 25, Argentina's sixth president in 18 months. With ten days, he had set in motion one of the most extensive overhauls of the leadership of the armed forces and the Federal Police in recent Argentine history.

"I have a dream to propose to you," said Kirchner in his inaugural address. "It is the construction of truth and justice, of once again having an Argentina with all and for all." Kirchner promised to attack corruption, work for social inclusion, and bring justice to the poor, who are 60% of the population. "We have to make sure the state brings equality where the market excludes and abandons," he said.

In a reference to the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, Kirchner urged Argentines to remember the ideals of "our generation, which gave all and did all, hoping to create a nation of equals." "I am part of a generation that was decimated and castigated by painful absences," he said, recalling the estimated 30,000 people who disappeared during the dictatorship. "I joined the political struggle believing in values and convictions that I don't intend to leave at the door of the presidential palace," he said, adding, "We arrive without rancor but with memory."

Kirchner criticized the policies of former President Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999), who withdrew from the May 18 runoff election against Kirchner (see NotiSur, 2003-05-23). He said Menem's policies had concentrated wealth in the hands of the few, and Kirchner promised a "national capitalism" that offers opportunities for social mobility.

The new president pledged to return growth to an economy that shrank by almost 12% last year, and he said that Argentina would not repay its creditors at the expense of needed social spending for the poor. "They will only be able to collect if things go well for Argentina," Kirchner said. "We are not supporters of default. But we will not pay if it means Argentines giving up their right to decent housing, a secure job, and health care."

Such comments foreshadow a rocky relationship between the Kirchner administration and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Earlier, Kirchner said he would not veto a recently approved bill protecting homeowners from foreclosures, a measure the IMF opposes. While most regional presidents attended the ceremony, the administration of US President George W. Bush sent no high-ranking representative.

The Bush administration has been unhappy with what it says is Argentina's unwillingness to undertake sufficient economic reforms. In what the local press considered a sign of US displeasure, the Bush administration sent Housing and Urban Development Secretary Mel Martinez as head of the US delegation to the inauguration.

Armed forces have new leaders

The day after his inauguration, Kirchner stunned the country by announcing major changes in the military leadership. As many as three-quarters of the country's highest-ranking military officers will be retired in what sources close to Kirchner say was a decision to purge the armed forces of human rights violators. The president's decision, criticized in military circles but praised by human rights groups, will mean retirement for 27 generals (75% of the total), 13 admirals (50%), and 12 brigadier generals (50%), including the top commanders of the three branches of the armed forces. The sweeping changes are unprecedented in Argentina.

Defense Minister Jose Pampuro said the decision did not indicate "purges nor an intention of anything other than that the forces be under the command of competent men who are trusted by the president." Nevertheless, those being retired were young officers during the military dictatorship and some were accused of human rights violations and benefitted from the amnesty laws passed by former Presidents Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989) and Menem. Pampuro later announced the appointment of the new military chiefs.

The army will be headed by Brig. Gen. Roberto Bendini, 52, the navy by Rear Adm. Jorge Godoy, 57, and the air force by Brig. Gen. Carlos Rohde, 54. Brig. Gen. Jorge Chevalier will head the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Outgoing army chief Lt. Gen. Ricardo Brinzoni made clear his anger at his dismissal. He said that Kirchner apparently wanted to "remove any officers who had any relationship with Carlos Menem." Brinzoni has been accused by human rights groups of responsibility for the Margarita Belen massacre a 1976 extrajudicial execution by firing squad of 22 political prisoners in the northern province of Chaco. Brinzoni, who was the provincial secretary of government in 1976, recently admitted that the political prisoners did not die "in a firefight, but were shot to death," and the incident was covered up.

On May 28, Brinzoni said that Kirchner's decision pained him "because of the inexplicable circumstances in which it occurs." Still, Brinzoni said, the army would abide by the law. "Political intrigue against the armed forces is as risky as before and seems to turn the clock back 20 years," he said.

At a military ceremony the following day Army Day Kirchner said, "I am commander in chief of all the armed forces of the nation, and I will meticulously fulfill that role for which I was elected." "No one can be surprised or ask for explanations or characterize a situation as inexplicable, when referring to the exercise of constitutional and legally regulated powers," Kirchner said. "To analyze and characterize the carrying out of political power is not the function of a military officer."

Police leadership next to be revamped

A week after the military shake-up, Kirchner said 80% of the Federal Police commanders would be removed. It is one of the biggest overhauls of the Federal Police in years. One of the few

commanders who will remain is Federal Police chief Roberto Giacomino. The Argentine press reported that Giacomino was kept on at the request of Anibal Ibarra, who heads the Buenos Aires city government. Ibarra said Giacomino had done a good job in the capital. Ibarra accompanied Justice and Security Minister Gustavo Beliz in the press conference announcing the moves, which included promoting Eduardo Prados to deputy chief and removing 10 police commissioners.

Prados is a lawyer with a reputation as an anti-corruption crusader. He has been the force's inspector general, and some reports said he was expected to move to the top job by the end of the year. Beliz said the firing of the 10 commissioners was just the start of basic reforms in the 32,000-member force, the largest in Argentina. "Profound but not traumatic changes" are also planned in 24 provincial superintendencies and at 53 precincts in the capital, Beliz said. The changes include a review of new appointees by local human rights groups.

The shake-up also affects the inefficient and sometimes brutal police force in Buenos Aires province. The police there will now report to a committee that includes the Federal Police and the National Intelligence Service, which has been the target of much criticism. Kirchner seemed to be responding to public outrage at the carjackings, ransom kidnappings, and daylight robberies that have become a daily occurrence since the recession began in 1998.

Complaints of police inefficiency and corruption have increased popular support for tougher policing of the country. Administration officials said the reorganization was part of a broader plan to tackle crime. Other steps include putting more police patrols in the streets, on passenger trains, and in conflictive areas. "I want a major effort toward prevention but also firmness against crime," said Kirchner after announcing the changes. "At the same time, I do not want to criminalize social protest."

Supreme Court changes could be next

Kirchner has indicated he would not oppose efforts to replace the entire Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), which was largely appointed by and considered still loyal to Menem. There is speculation that Kirchner would like a new court that might overturn the amnesty decrees signed by Alfonsín and Menem. Beliz said that it is the prerogative of the Congress to act in the matter, but he added that, if the renovation of the court depended on a presidential decree, "it would have already been resolved."

On June 2, the Congress reopened efforts to impeach some CSJ justices. The Comisión de Juicio Político, headed by former presidential candidate Elisa Carrió, said that PJ deputies were initiating a process against Judge Carlos Fayt and Judge Julio Nazareno, president of the CSJ. The administration of President Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003) tried to impeach all nine CSJ justices in an effort to depoliticize the court. Five of the justices were named or ratified during the Menem administration and the court always voted for Menem or his interests. Duhalde finally stopped the process because the judges began handing down decisions against his decrees. Referring to a possible impeachment, Fayt said he was not going to resign because he is innocent and "the accusations are ill-intentioned."

On June 3, Kirchner said the country still has a long way to go, but he said the people were up to the task. "We have three options: just definitively give up, submit to the plans of orthodox neoliberalism, or rebuild a country for all Argentines," he said, adding that his administration intended to take the third option.

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