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Conservative Political Shift Benefits Argentina’s Military and Police

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More than three decades after the end of the last dictatorship (1976-1983), during which tens of thousands of people were killed, tortured, disappeared, or forced into exile, the new president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2015, and Jan. 29, 2016), is granting the armed forces and police powers that all of the previous post-1983 governments, in accordance with the Constitution, had reserved for themselves.

“This isn’t about giving the military new faculties; it’s about restoring certain attributes that were lost with the return of civilian government. This is what Decree 721, signed by the president, establishes,” said Vice President Gabriela Michetti in reference to a recent executive order that, among other things, frees leaders of the armed forces from having to seek legislative approval, as established by law, for decisions on military appointments, promotions, transfers, and awards (NotiSur, Nov. 4, 1994).

The June 1 decree immediately sparked controversy. Agustín Rossi, defense minister under the previous administration, accused Michetti of simply “not telling the truth” when she talked about “restoring” certain attributes. “It was under the dictatorship that the military appropriated powers that had belonged to the civilian authorities, who took them back with the advent of democracy,” Rossi said.

Rossi noted that the decree gives military leaders the power, for example, to appoint retired officers as teachers in the armed forces’ education programs. “This needs to be seen in the context of the country’s recent history with a savage dictatorship,” he said. Previously, the hiring of military teachers had to go through various levels of the Defense Ministry, which used criteria such as institutional transparency and human rights to vet candidates. Those safeguards no longer apply. “As such, we could have a human rights violator educating our future soldiers,” Rossi said.

‘Provocative and unnecessary’

Recently, Argentina has also seen the return of military parades, a practice that had been halted in 2000 as a way to minimize the public presence of the armed forces. Former chiefs with questionable dictatorship-era records have been assigned, furthermore, to top public posts. And the leader of the pro-government legislative bloc, Deputy Emilio Monzó, said publicly that the military would go back to handling intelligence work and participating in domestic security, roles that led it to commit wholesale human rights violations during the dictatorship. All of these developments are taking place against a background of constant media reports of a supposed upsurge of drugs trafficking in Argentina.

The conservative daily La Nación, one of the old mouthpieces of the dictatorship, applauded the changes. “The parades that were held to mark the bicentennial of our independence [July 9] were an indication of the restored status of the armed forces,” the newspaper argued in a July 14 editorial. Many spectators, particularly children, also seemed to enjoy the colorful parades, which
featured things like period uniforms and lively bands. The events marked the 200th anniversary of Argentina’s independence from Spain.

But there were also a few dark elements in the celebrations that drew complaints from human rights organizations. Two incidents in particular were seen, in the words of Hebe de Bonafini, president of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo association, as “frankly provocative and unnecessary.” One was the appearance, aboard a military vehicle, of Aldo Rico, a former lieutenant colonel who has been implicated in human rights abuses and whose military career came to an end after he led a pair of failed coups, in 1987 and 1988 (NotiSur, Jan 21, 1988). Rico appeared in the Buenos Aires parade together with a detachment of war veterans. President Macri defended Rico’s presence as “a demonstration of this period of rapprochement that we’re experiencing.”

The other controversial episode took place 270 kilometers to the west, in the city of Junín, where the bicentennial celebrations included a caravan of classic cars. Among the vehicles was a green, 1976 Ford Falcon with no license plate. That particular make, model and color of car (and without a license plate) is one of the most sinister symbols of the dictatorship. The green, unmarked Falcons were the standard police vehicles at the time and were used to carry out thousands of abductions of people who are still missing.

**Police clubs for kids**

Another sign of the changing political times in Argentina is the reestablishment in various provinces of juvenile police units made up of children between the ages of six and 14. The units are geared toward “raising their patriotic spirit … to bring out the police officer we all carry inside us,” Julio César Gutiérrez, a police chief in the northern province of Catamarca, was quoted as saying in April by the website Infonews.

Although there are no official numbers, backers of such programs—which had been outlawed in 2010 by the Ministry of Security—say some 10,000 children are already involved. Participants receive basic military training, wear police uniforms and bulletproof vests, and carry toy guns. “We can think of this as a kind of rivalry with the rich kids who are privileged enough to participate in groups like the Boy Scouts, the Lion’s Club, or Rotary International’s Interact,” said Gutiérrez. “Our kids, from poor families, get a chance to have fun. And they’ll leave here with a chance to be the best they can be.”

Miguel Vázquez Sastre, a provincial deputy, disagrees. “This markedly nationalistic mindset is dangerous,” he said. “It looks to generate a class divide that doesn’t exist.” Other critics, such as Judge Rodrigo Morabito, say the push to create juvenile police clubs violates Argentina’s obligations vis-à-vis the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). “Don’t be fooled,” Marabito said. “Parents are only signing up for this because [the clubs] serve their kids two meals a day.”

The UNCRC, approved in 1989, was cited in 2010 when the previous government outlawed the creation of juvenile police bodies. Article 38 of the document establishes that “children under 15 should not be forced or recruited to take part in a war or join the armed forces.” Marabito interprets the prohibition as also applying to police units. “Children shouldn’t be recruited or summoned, as it were, because police forces only prepare people to prevent crime. They don’t teach children other values.”


**Bad choice of venue**

Children also took center stage recently in a controversy in the Buenos Aires satellite city of Morón, where the mayor, Ramiro Tagliaferro, ordered that a promesa a la bandera (allegiance to the flag) ceremony be held in the patio of the local air base, one of the country’s most important, rather than at a public plaza, as tradition dictates. The oath-taking ceremonies involve fourth-graders (9-year-olds) and are held every year on June 20, the anniversary of the death, in 1820, of Manuel Belgrano, who designed the Argentine flag.

Regardless of what may have motivated Tagliaferro’s decision, what is clear is that during the dictatorship, the Morón air base served as one of the most active concentration camps in the province of Buenos Aires. Hundreds disappeared there, and at least 19 died as a result of torture. Human rights trials later established that prisoners were sexually abused there on a systematic basis. Parents of students and members of the teachers union complained about the choice of venue for the ceremony, eventually leading the mayor to change his mind. Tagliaferro is the ex-husband of María Eugenia Vidal, the governor of the province of Buenos Aires and the second highest-ranking figure in the governing party.

It was against this background that the Macri government decided recently to invite the youth arms of Argentina’s various political parties to participate in a roundtable discussion. Some 40 young leaders attended the gathering, which was led by the president’s Cabinet chief, Marcos Peña, and also included Social Development Minister Carolina Stanley and the deputy minister of youth affairs, Pedro Robledo. The decision to assign Peña to the meeting underscores just how important the event was for Macri, as did the fact that it took place in the executive mansion, the Casa Rosada, in an office right next to the president’s.

The event caused a stir, however, when it was revealed on July 14, the day after the meeting, that the participants had included two members of Bandera Vecinal, a Nazi party that lost a legal battle two years ago to use a swastika as part of its official logo (*NotiSur, April 22, 2016*). During the gathering, the two Nazi party representatives used outdated language to complain, for example, about “an upswing of communism” and propose that mandatory military service be reestablished. Authorities ended that practice in 1994, after an 18-year-old conscript died while being tortured by his Army unit instructors.

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