

Background Guide



WAMUNC XXVI

REDEMOCRATIZATION
IN ARGENTINA



Letter from the Chair

Hello delegates,

My name is João Cardoso, although I usually go by JC for the sake of pronunciation. I am originally from São Paulo, Brazil. I am a current junior here at GW, studying international affairs, with a concentration in Latin America, and a minor in socio-cultural anthropology. This conference will be my third time staffing WAMUNC. Beyond Model UN, I am a member of the Brazilian Students Association at GW, where we run campus events for the Brazilian community. I am also a tour guide for the undergraduate admissions office, so if any of you take a tour of GW, I might be your guide. In my free time, I like to watch movies with friends, listen to music, play poker and Monopoly with friends, and procrastinate on writing MUN background guides.

The topic for this committee is a heavy but important one. The repercussions of the military dictatorship are still felt in Argentina today. Raúl Alfonsín is considered by most in Argentina a heroic figure for his role in reestablishing Argentine democracy, and for his pursuit of truth and justice in the aftermath of the dictatorship. I hope that as delegates in this committee, you will help carry on that legacy, and also gain an understanding for how countries can emerge from authoritarianism. While I encourage everyone to have fun and enjoy themselves in the committee while doing their best to represent their characters, it is also important to be respectful of the topic and the victims of the Argentine junta. Some of the characters that you will be representing had favorable views of the military dictatorship, and while you should accurately represent their perspectives, please do not go overboard in your speeches and crisis notes.

If anyone has any questions about the committee, feel free to email me at jcardoso@gwu.edu (remember to CC your advisor if you do email me), and I hope everyone has a great conference!

Introduction to the Committee

This committee will take place in early 1984, shortly after Raúl Alfonsín took office. At this time, Argentina had just emerged from a brutal dictatorship that left thousands dead. While the sheer scale of human rights abuses committed by the government was unknown to many, the fact that the government was openly murdering dissidents was somewhat of an open secret. It is estimated that between 10,000 to 30,000 people were killed by the military regime, and thousands more were tortured, kidnapped, and imprisoned in concentration camps. Many victims of this brutal repression were not violent guerrillas, they simply had left wing views or belonged to left wing groups. Roughly 2 million Argentines went into exile during this period.

Additionally, the economy was in a very poor state, as inflation was high, wages were low, and Argentina owed a significant amount of foreign debt. Furthermore, the population was fatigued by decades of political instability and violence, which included 4 separate military coups. It is in this context that Raúl Alfonsín was elected to lead Argentina into the future, but many uncertainties remained. For example, there was doubt as to whether or not Argentina should prosecute the members of the junta for their crimes against humanity, because many in the Alfonsín government were worried that this would risk another military coup (in fact, a mutiny did take place in 1987). There were discussions about how the new governments should deal with the trade unions in Argentina, which had been an incredibly powerful force in the country before the coup in 1976. The members of this committee represent many different sectors of

Argentine society and government. About half of the members of the committee are members of the Alfonsín cabinet and government. There are also committee members from the military, human rights activist organizations, foreign financial institutions, foreign governments, and unions. The role of this committee will be to find the best path forward for Argentina, while maintaining the democratic nature of the new regime.

The committee itself will be a meeting of various sectors of Argentine society (as well as important foreign actors) to decide the future of Argentina. There will be a backroom, and delegates are encouraged to submit crisis notes and think of their character's crisis arcs. Bear in mind that many members of the committee are not actually part of the government, so while they might not be able to vote on government decrees, they can still play a role in formulating these decrees, and can also influence action through the backroom.

Historical Background

Juan Perón and the leadup to the Military Coup (1943-1976)

To understand what led to extreme political instability in Argentina towards the end of the 1970s, it is important to know Juan Perón. Juan Perón was a former army colonel who rose to prominence in Argentine society during the mid 1940s, while he served as Secretary of Labor and Vice President after a military coup in 1943 (which had been preceded by roughly 20 years of electoral fraud).¹ In his role as Secretary of Labor, Perón worked to strengthen union membership, through welfare spending, increasing labor rights, and giving government posts to members of unions.² Most importantly during this time, he consolidated the various unions that existed in Argentina at the time and passed a law requiring unions to be registered with the

¹ Laura Tedesco, *Democracy in Argentina: Hope and disillusion*, Frank Cass, 1999.

² *Ibid.*

government.³ This intrinsically connected the labor unions to the government, and by extension, Perón himself. In October 1945, the military government tried to arrest Perón, however, thousands of workers gathered at the Plaza de Mayo in the capital, Buenos Aires, to protest; the military government eventually relented and released Perón.⁴ Perón went on to win the presidential elections in 1946 and 1952 but was ousted by a coup in 1955, going into exile in Spain.⁵ Perónism as an ideology organized the working class into strong unions, these unions were politically active and loyal to Perón.⁶ Through its representation within the trade unions, the working class became one of the most important blocks in Argentine politics.⁷ After the coup in 1955, the military began a concerted effort to “de-Perónise” Argentina: this included the removal of many Perón loyalists in both the trade unions and the government.⁸ However, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the largest confederation of trade unions in Argentina, resisted this through general strikes and armed raids by Perónist militias.⁹ Perónism remained an important force in Argentine politics despite Perón himself being in exile, and Perónist candidates saw electoral successes during the 1960s.¹⁰ After relatively little success in “de-Perónisation” during the 1960s, the military launched another coup in 1966, but in contrast to previous coups, the armed forces did not immediately cede power towards a civilian government and remained in power until 1973.¹¹ During this time, guerilla groups began to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

emerge.¹² In 1973, Perón returned to Argentina after the end of the dictatorship and that year won the presidential election with 62% of the votes, but died in July of 1974, after which his wife Isabella Perón took the presidency.¹³ During Isabella's time in office, urban violence between left and right-wing paramilitary organizations increased.¹⁴ It was in the context of this high urban violence that the military decided to stage yet another coup, to re-establish "social discipline".¹⁵

Military Rule 1976 - 1983

The military referred to its period of rule as the "national reorganization process".¹⁶ The dictatorship was ruled by an overarching committee of military leaders, who essentially took turns being the president. The first of these was Jorge Rafael Videla, who ruled from 1976 to 1981, he was followed by Roberto Viola until 1982, who was then followed by Leopoldo Galtieri, from 1982 until the end of the junta in 1983. Once in power, Videla and the rest of the military started a war against the urban guerillas, in what has become known as "the dirty war". The dirty war was the campaign by the military to try and eradicate the guerillas and bring an end to the urban violence that Argentina had been experiencing, although many non-guerilla members who simply had leftist sympathies/affiliations were also targeted.¹⁷ Many "subversives" were forcibly kidnapped by security forces, tortured, and then killed.¹⁸ The ultimate fate for the

¹² Ibid, 10.

¹³ Ibid, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid, 24.

¹⁷ Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James Naylor Green, "Argentina: Progress, Stalemate, Discord," essay, in *Modern Latin America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 259.

¹⁸ Ibid.

vast majority of those who were killed was never revealed, leaving their families and loved ones in the dark.

It is estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 people were forcibly “disappeared” by the military during the 7-year-long dictatorship.¹⁹ The extreme nature of the human rights violations isolated Argentina on the international stage.²⁰ There was some open opposition to the dirty war among sectors of Argentine society, but the middle class generally supported the government, although the full extent of the human rights abuses was unknown to many civilians. One of the few organizations open against the human rights abuses of the regime was The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of elderly mothers whose children had been disappeared by the regime.²¹ They held public demonstrations weekly in the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires, demanding to know the fates of their children.²² Several of their founders were disappeared by the regime in 1977.²³ Another similar group that was active during this time was the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who were demanding to know the fates of the children who were forcibly kidnapped from the disappeared and given to families that were friendly towards the military regime.²⁴

Beyond the human rights violations, military rule had other significant consequences for Argentine society. The military junta shut down the CGT, and tried to directly control other institutions in Argentine society, most notably was sports through the hosting of the 1978 World

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Laura Tedesco, *Democracy in Argentina: Hope and Disillusion* (Frank Cass, 1999), 26.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Calatrava, Almudena. “Human Rights Group Identifies 133rd Baby Snatched from Mother during Argentina’s Dictatorship.” AP News, July 28, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/argentina-dictatorship-grandmothers-plaza-mayo-2eafa1ec9b7249ee0c7fef0b83da3b2>.

Cup.²⁵ In terms of economics, the military dictatorship had a neoliberal approach to economics under economics minister José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz; privatizing state-run companies, and heavily reducing tariffs.²⁶ While inflation, which had been incredibly high during the 1970s, temporarily reduced in 1980, it quickly went back up, and by 1981 the inflation rate exceeded 100%.²⁷ Wages and real income had also declined since the early 1970s.²⁸ Between 1980 and 1981, GDP fell by more than 6%.²⁹ As an attempt to distract Argentine society from the ailing economy, the armed forces decided to launch an invasion of the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas, which was an overseas territory of the UK that Argentina had laid claim to.³⁰ By 1982, protests had begun to appear across Argentina in response to the worsening economic situation, and the military government felt that a successful invasion of the Falklands would not only distract the Argentine population, but also help the generals keep control of the country and bring legitimacy to their rule.³¹ The Argentine military quickly took control of the archipelago, but the UK launched a counterattack and quickly retook the islands, defeating the Argentine military.³² The failure of the Falklands War sparked the catalyst that would lead to the end of the military junta in 1983.

The End of the Dictatorship and the Immediate Transition to Democracy (1983)

²⁵ Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James Naylor Green, “Argentina: Progress, Stalemate, Discord,” essay, in *Modern Latin America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 260.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Laura Tedesco, *Democracy in Argentina: Hope and Disillusion* (Frank Cass, 1999), 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James Naylor Green, “Argentina: Progress, Stalemate, Discord,” essay, in *Modern Latin America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 261.

³² *Ibid.*

By 1983, Argentina was in disarray. The economy was in shambles with high inflation and low wages, and the military had just suffered a very public defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas war. In this context, General Galtieri resigned from the presidency, and the Navy and Airforce left the junta, leaving only the army in charge.³³ In late 1982, the military government lifted its ban on political activity, and opposition to the dictatorship became more formal and open.³⁴ The government agreed to a transition of power and attempted to negotiate with the opposition, however, the military government had little to no legitimacy, and thus the opposition and the public at large rejected the demands of the military.³⁵ The population was growing increasingly restless in calling for the return of democracy, and multiple general strikes were staged to pressure the government to cede control.³⁶ Before ceding power the military government unilaterally passed a law giving themselves amnesty for any human rights violations committed during the dictatorship.

In late 1983, the military government announced that elections would be held in October and a civilian government would take power in January of 1984.³⁷ In October, Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical party won a majority of the popular vote, and the Radical party won a plurality of the seats in the chamber of deputies, in both cases outperforming the Perónist party.³⁸ Alfonsín campaigned on a promise to persecute the members of the armed forces who had committed human rights abuses during the dictatorship.³⁹ He also accused the Perónist party of colluding

³³ Laura Tedesco, *Democracy in Argentina: Hope and Disillusion* (Frank Cass, 1999), 51.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 52.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 52.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

with the regime, saying that a Perónist government would not investigate the human rights violations.⁴⁰ Alfonsín won the support of much of the moderate right middle class, and his election was the first time that a non-Perónist candidate won the popular vote in a free and fair election since the 1940s.⁴¹

Important Factors to Consider

Economy and Labor

At the end of the dictatorship, Argentina's economy was firmly in ruins. It had the highest inflation rate of any country in the world, and the country owed about \$45 Billion in foreign debt to international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.⁴² Additionally, economic and living standards for middle-class Argentines had declined since the early 1970s, and these Argentines desired a return to previous living standards.⁴³ Many Argentines also owed huge amounts of personal debt, largely in US dollars: this amount totals nearly \$40 Billion.⁴⁴ The committee must find a way of resolving Argentina's debt crisis with foreign institutions, while not further reducing living standards, which will seriously aggravate the population.

Another point of contention for Alfonsín is the power and role of Unions, most importantly the CGT. While the election of Alfonsín represented a rejection of Perónism by the Argentine public, Perónism as an ideology still dominated among union leaders.⁴⁵ Many former

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Schumacher, Edward. "Argentina and Democracy." *Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 1984. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/argentina/1984-06-01/argentina-and-democracy>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

union leaders had risen to important positions within the Perónist party.⁴⁶ In real life 1984, many unions conducted a series of strikes in protest of Alfonsín negotiations with the IMF.⁴⁷ Even though these strikes take place shortly after the start of the committee, it's important to remember that the unions are an incredibly powerful institutional force within Argentina, and the members of the committee need to find a way to work together with the unions.

Political Stability

As you read in the historical background section, Argentine politics were been incredibly unstable in the 20th century, and there was a serious desire by those who voted for Alfonsín to return to democracy and normality, without the extremes of the junta or Perónism.⁴⁸ Alfonsín strongly represented the political center in Argentina, who were appalled by the actions of the junta, but also did not want a return to the populist chaos of Juan Perón.⁴⁹ Alfonsín had a serious desire to prosecute the members of the junta for their crimes against humanity, but there was serious concern about the possibility of another military coup if the response was too harsh. While Alfonsín was explicitly anti-Perónist, his radical party did not control a majority of the seats in the chamber of deputies, even if they were the largest party,⁵⁰ and so, some political compromise must be reached to keep the government together. One of the main goals of the committee should thus be to preserve Argentinian democracy and try to keep the government stable.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The Role of the Military and the Need for Justice

During the 20th century, military coups were relatively commonplace in Argentina, as the country experienced 4 coups in a 45-year period from 1930 to 1976. Historically, the military had the goal of stabilizing the country, so they would often launch coups in response to instability, before quickly ceding control to a civilian government, but this was not the case in 1976. After the 1976 coup, the military wanted to restructure Argentine society, which is why the levels of repression were so high and brutal.⁵¹ Alfonsín had a strong desire to hold the military accountable for their crimes against humanity, as well as reduce the power of the military more generally.⁵² In real life, he did this by reducing the military budget by roughly a third, and forcing the early retirement of many former generals and colonels (this happened in early to mid-1984, after the start of the committee).⁵³ One of his first acts after coming into office in December of 1983, was founding the National Commission on the Disappeared, which published information for the public about the crimes committed by the junta, as well as identified those who were forcibly disappeared.⁵⁴ Alfonsín also aimed to prosecute the leaders of the junta for their crimes, with a trial and prosecution taking place in 1985 (after the start of the committee).⁵⁵ As previously mentioned though, there were serious worries about the possibility of another coup if the military were held accountable for its actions, so the committee will have to navigate finding justice while also not risking another descent into military authoritarianism.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Argentina.” International Center for Transitional Justice. Accessed November 25, 2023. <https://www.ictj.org/location/argentina>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Character List

Note, how many of these characters will actually be in the committee will depend on the number of registrants for WAMUNC, so it's likely that not all these people will be in the committee. It is also possible (if unlikely) that more characters might be added if enrollment at WAMUNC is higher than anticipate.

Executive:

- Raúl Alfonsín, President
- Víctor Hipólito Martínez, Vice President

Cabinet:

- Economic Minister Bernardo Grinspun
- Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship Dante Caputo
- Minister of Defense Raúl Borrás
- Minister of Justice and Education Carlos Alconada Aramburú

- Minister of Labor Antonio Mucci
- Secretary of State Intelligence Roberto Manuel Pena
- Minister of Health Aldo Neri

Other Members of Government:

- Julio César Strassera, Chief prosecutor during the trial of the Juntas
- Luis Moreno Ocampo, Assistance prosecutor during the trial of the Juntas
- León Arslanián, Chief justice during the trial of the Juntas
- Lucio García del Solar, Ambassador to the US
- Julio César Saguier, Mayor of Buenos Aires
- Julio Fernández Torres, Chief of the Military Joint Chiefs of Staff

- Jorge Arguindegui, Chief of the Army

- Ramón Arosa, Chief of the Navy

- Teodoro Waldner, Chief of the Air Force

- Enrique García Vázquez , President of the Central Bank

- Carlos Santiago Nino, Philosopher and advisor to President Alfonsín

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Non-governmental positions in Argentine Society:

- Saúl Ubaldini, head of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), largest trade union in Argentina

- Reynardo Herrera, Leader of UOM, the Metallurgical Labor Union

■ (Fictional Character)

- Hebe de Bonafini, Founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

- Estela de Carlotto, representative of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

- (The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo did not have as clear leadership compared to the Mothers, but Estela is the current president and was active with them since the 1970s)

- Aldo Rico, Lieutenant Colonel in the Armed Forces who opposed democracy

- Launched a failed military mutiny in 1987.

Important Outside Observers:

- Tom Clausen, President of the World Bank
- William Hood, Chief economist of the IMF
- Frank V. Ortiz Jr., Ambassador of the US to Argentina and GW Alumni
- Duane Clarridge, chief of the Latin American Division of the CIA

- Took an active role in Operation Condor, helping support right wing dictatorships in South America.

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