

## Raul Alfonsin

When Raul Alfonsin was asked what he hoped to achieve as President of Argentina, he replied that his proudest day would be when he handed over the presidency to another elected civilian. It will be no mean achievement, if he does it, and it is as well to bear in mind that it has never yet been done in Argentina.

Yet, there is now a stirring of doubt about when exactly Alfonsin will hand over and what sort of democracy it will be when he does.

Up to now, he has appeared as a kind of uncle-hero. Born in the unpromising surroundings of Chascomus, son of a shopkeeper and lifelong supporter of the Radical Party, Alfonsin seemed one of the men in Argentine politics least likely to be president. He was elected a congressman in 1958, but never made it to any position of importance in the two Radical administrations which followed. In 1972 he founded a dissident minority faction within the crumbling Radical Party, dedicated to

inevitable. But as an Argentine writer remarked recently in Alfonsin's defence, he can only govern the country he has, not the country we would wish him to have.

The plague of civil politics in Argentina has been the *caudillo*, the demagogue at the head of a party which behaves like a movement, a loose coalition of frequently conflicting interest groups. The leader maintains his power through negotiation within the party, but also by direct appeal to the people over the heads of his party and his government. Alfonsin, in his long years in the wilderness, planned to build a model of Western social democracy in Argentina, to break away from the idea that civilian democracy can only work if there is a leader who carries all before him.

But here comes the paradox. In order to consolidate the system, in order to transform the nation into a modern democracy, Alfonsin now argues, he needs another term and a bigger majority. And in order to do that, he has to rewrite the constitution to enable Alfonsin to stay in power.

The paradox was evident from the beginning. The Argentine electorate chose Alfonsin in far larger numbers than they chose the Radicals. In opinion polls since, Alfonsin's personal popularity consistently scores higher than the government's or the party's. In every crisis of his government, Alfonsin has resorted to a direct appeal for support to the people, most dramatically and, finally, most dubiously, on Easter Sunday following a rebellion by military officers.

It is a measure, and not a very consoling one, of Alfonsin's political skills with the crowd that he emerged triumphant from his Easter Sunday rally. He managed to convince the crowd that they and he together had saved democracy from the military. The truth is rather less straightforward, but does

illustrate the degree to which Alfonsin is becoming trapped by the power of his own image.

The fact is that from the beginning, Alfonsin wanted to apply to the armed forces the formula which the government is now struggling to adopt: to make the nation appreciate the enormity of what had taken place in the dirty war, but to limit retribution to the leadership of the armed forces and to a few notorious torturers. The bulk of the participants would be absolved on the principle, rejected at Nuremberg, that they were only obeying orders. Argentina in 1983 was not Germany in 1945. There were no Allied powers with the power to create the state in the image they chose. If Alfonsin had ever seriously considered abolishing the Argentine armed forces and starting again, he had rejected the idea before he came to power in favour of trying to persuade the armed forces to make their own self criticism and forge a new relationship with civil authority. The logic of his position was to amnesty the middle ranking officers at the beginning, but his own public image - that of the man who would bring justice - and the traumatic effect of *Nunca Mas*, the report on the disappeared that Alfonsin himself had commissioned, had raised the expectation of vengeance to such a pitch that an amnesty was politically impossible.

The tragedy is that Alfonsin has fallen off the tightrope, although the crowd has not yet noticed. Far from examining its collective conscience, the Argentine forces have hardened their belief that they acted correctly, even honourably, in the dirty war. In April they tested their power to impose this view on the government and they won. Nerves were so shaken by the events of Easter week that it will probably be possible, though messy, to produce the fix that the government has been quietly promising the armed forces from the beginning, but it is a serious defeat both for the hope that Argen-



Alfonsin: Uncle-hero

tina's military is capable of self-reform and the hope that a civilian government has the authority to impose such a reform upon them. It is also, sadly, the first time that Alfonsin has traded falsely on his image: it was not the enthusiasm of the crowd and the courage of the president which defused the military rebellion. It was a backstage deal which was done even before the presidential helicopter took off for the Campo de Mayo.

Alfonsin must govern the country he has. Now he is seeking a government of national consensus, appealing for mass support to create the country he wants. His opposition accuses him of demagoguery while unreconstructed sectors of his own party dream of it - a third great historical movement with Alfonsin at its head. They may be an embarrassment to Alfonsin now, but the question is how far it is possible to sustain Radical power through the charisma of the leader, without the leadership becoming the end in itself. It would be a sad end for a political reformer to become the demagogue in spite of himself. •  
Isabel Hilton

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modernising the party and rejecting the political style of the Radical *caudillo*, Ricardo Balbin. He was pushed out for his impertinence and not re-elected in 1973. During the turbulent 1970s he was politically in the cold, but established a reputation as a man whose principles led him to acts which the prudent considered foolhardy in the extreme.

It was in this period that his credentials as a defender of human rights were established. He was the promise that there were honest men in Argentina, who could restore the moral health of the nation.

With expectations this high, disappointment was perhaps