

Did Menem really win Argentine elections?

by Cynthia R. Rush

Since Argentina's mid-term congressional and gubernatorial elections on Sept. 8, international and local press have claimed that the victory of President Carlos Menem's Peronist party represented a popular mandate for his government's free market economic reforms. The Peronists won overwhelmingly in 10 out of 12 provinces contested, including in the all-important province of Buenos Aires, where Vice President Eduardo Duhalde trounced opponent Antonio Cafiero. "The voters have thus overwhelmingly endorsed the economic reform policies of President Carlos Menem and his economy minister Domingo Cavallo," the *Financial Times* of London crowed on Sept. 10.

A better explanation for the victory might be that a population demoralized and disgusted by years of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity policies, and more recently by the extraordinary corruption and other scandals dogging the Menem government, went through the formality of exercising its "democratic right," without much caring about the outcome one way or the other. It didn't seem to matter to people that they elected a race car driver, Alberto Reutemann, as governor of Santa Fe province, or a monotone pop star, "Palito" Ortega, as governor of Tucumán province.

The word now being put out internationally is that with this tremendous electoral "mandate," the Menem government can quickly move forward, virtually unopposed, with the political and economic agenda which the Bush administration and the IMF have set for it: stepping up the privatization of state sector companies, increasing monthly debt payments to creditor banks, smashing the trade unions, and completing the "reform" program which will dismantle the institution of the Armed Forces. "The electoral process was amazing because of its correctness," Menem said on Sept. 9. The Peronists won, "because of what we are doing throughout the country."

A 'carapintada' plot?

But if the Argentine people gave Menem such a mandate, and if the future looks so rosy for Cavallo's free market plan, then why has Menem launched such a tirade against the nationalist wing of the Army (known as *carapintadas* or "painted faces," in reference to the camouflage paint worn by soldiers), whose leader is Malvinas War hero Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín?

Under Seineldín's leadership, the *carapintadas* constitute an incipient nationalist resistance to George Bush's new world order, which Menem has wholeheartedly embraced. The colonel's defense of national sovereignty has also sparked resistance in other Ibero-American countries. A civilian appeals court has just given long jail terms to several key leaders of this nationalist grouping, including a life sentence for Colonel Seineldín, following their six-month trial for involvement in a Dec. 3, 1990 military uprising.

Yet even with the nationalist leaders behind bars, the government is now claiming that they are behind virtually every crime committed in the country—from kidnappings, to bank robberies and murders. Interior Minister José Luis Manzano charged on Sept. 14 that it is probably the *carapintadas* who have not yet been arrested "who are carrying out activities as common criminals," and are engaged in a campaign to "discredit the government."

Menem has even gone out of his way to lavish praise on Col. Aldo Rico, a long-time asset of the U.S. embassy, who won over 12% in his campaign for the governorship of Buenos Aires. In an undisguised attack on Seineldín, Menem stated that Rico, who had been involved in previous military uprisings, "realized that nothing can be gained through the use of force, and entered the democratic world and spoke with the people, and they did not turn their backs on him."

So great is the government's hysteria that it has accused Menem's estranged wife, Zulema Yoma, of being involved in a *carapintada* plot against the President. After a lawyer for Zulema announced that she was filing suit against the President for his failure to make alimony payments, Congressman Miguel Ángel Tomá charged that the former First Lady had held secret meetings with nationalist military leaders and was in league with them "to destabilize the democratic system." The weekly magazine *Noticias* put a picture of Zulema Yoma dressed in combat fatigues on its front cover, under the headline "Captain Zulema: The Carapintada Plot."

No to 'false democracy'

In a July interview with *Cronista Comercial*, jailed nationalist Capt. Gustavo Breide Obeid identified what is probably really bothering Carlos Menem. The phenomenon of *carapintadismo*, he explained, is "an act of resistance in the face of false democracy . . . it is an attitude which has spread to the rest of society and has exploded. When [the government] wants to dirty something which is a response to the system, they call it *carapintadismo*."

Menem undoubtedly understands that his touted "mandate" is not all that solid, and as the country's economic crisis worsens, as it must inevitably do under the IMF's intensified looting schemes, it is *this*, and not the *carapintadas*, which will discredit the government. Under these conditions, people will increasingly look to Seineldín's resistance movement as a political and moral alternative to Menem's "false democracy."