

# Ensuring today and for all times, democracy and respect for human dignity in Argentina

Raul Alfonsin

*On 10 December 1983, Raul Alfonsin takes up the presidency of Argentina after seven years of military dictatorship. Forty days earlier he had been elected in the polls with almost 52% of the votes, in elections comparable to the plebiscite victories of Juan Domingo Peron or Hipolito Yrigoyen, undisputed leaders of the Peronist Party and the Radical Civic Union, respectively.*

*Alfonsin decided to deliver his first speech to the Argentine people since the return of democracy on a particular day and place. International Human Rights Day is commemorated on 10 December, and the president, whose campaign speech contrasted with the dominant repressive discourse and had placed emphasis on the restoration of democratic values and on overcoming the authoritarian mentality, chose this date to start a new cycle. The choice of the town council, on the other hand, indicates a difference with the political tradition of speaking from the balcony of the Casa Rosada (Government House) and it restores the historical significance of that building, linked to the founding of the Argentine nation and the significant role of the people.*

*Just as the date and space indicate the beginning of a political era of re-founding, Alfonsin's trajectory itself is linked to the shaping of a new subjectivity. In 1972 he led the renewal of radicalism through the creation of the Movement for Renewal and Change, a division closer to European social democracy, and during the dictatorship he distinguished himself from other politicians when he publicly confronted the military, took up the defence of political prisoners and the claims for the missing persons, and criticised the occupation of the Falkland Islands by the de facto government.*

*Alfonsin's speech at the town council is part of Argentina's rhetorical history. It is a founding speech, or rather, one of re-founding, as it invokes the desire to form a national union, expressed for the first time in the 1853 Constitution, to which he makes explicit reference. Over and above conflicting interests, Alfonsin, before a multiparty and diverse popular demonstration, defines democracy as a collective construction. Through rhetoric, he constitutes a heterogeneous audience, composed of diverse political and ideological affiliations, into a homogeneous democratic subject, united around a civic ethic.*

*The return of democracy in Argentina generated expectations beyond the country's borders, as evidenced by the presence of numerous foreign authorities at its resumption and of representations of organisations defending human rights in Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, where there were still military governments. South African newspapers reflected this international interest in their publications around those days. The Cape Times, for example, announced on 31 October, the day after the presidential elections: "Argentine military rule ends", and announced the radical victory a day later: "Alfonsin claims win in Argentina". Meanwhile, the Cape Argus gave it more coverage. For example, the headline on 31 October read, "Radicals set to win Argentine poll", and expressed its surprise the following day at the Peronist defeat: "Crushing defeat for Peronists – after 40 years". On its cover on 10 December, 1983, the headline is "Argentina's new president sworn in today".*

*However, from the town council, Alfonsin specifically addresses his countrymen and calls on them for a common task: to consolidate the rules of democratic coexistence and recognise themselves as part of Argentina's Rule of Law. In a political context of residual tension with the*

armed forces and with the unions, the president intends to strengthen the bond with the public, who brought him to power, and “channel” to that expectant crowd that is eager to participate but which has little experience in the civic exercise. In this sense, the evocation of the constitutional Preamble acquires a double meaning. On the one hand, it establishes an affiliation with the founding fathers of the nation; on the other, it confirms our commitment to the Republican institutional norms in a context of the transition towards democracy.

Hours earlier, the President had inaugurated the sessions of the Legislative Assembly. That speech sets a counterpoint with regard to the town council: before Congress, Alfonsín prepares his government proposal and defines the ethical foundations of his programme; before the people he makes a collective call to unity and defines the bases for an effective dialogue with the citizens who are “waking up” to democracy. The seven years of dictatorship had imposed a repressive regime, which left more than 30000 missing persons. This legacy of terror was compounded by an economic crisis marked by inflation and a growing foreign debt. The discontent resulting from such a scenario is skilfully channelled by Alfonsín, who simultaneously associates the recovered democracy with the values of public freedom and social rights. The historic phrase, pronounced by Alfonsín before Congress, “With democracy we not only vote, we also eat, educate and heal”, condenses popular demands.

Minutes before Alfonsín appeared on the balcony of the town council, the waiting crowd gathered at the Plaza de Mayo was singing, “Ole le, Ola la, if this is not the people, where is the people?”, and they did not stop when he showed up and this forced the new president to start his speech over and over again. The collective voice of the audience and that of Alfonsín, overlap in those first interruptions. The active and vociferous crowd determines with their expectations and demands the speech that Alfonsín dialogically shapes in a strategic way. With his first reflections, the crowd responds with an ovation. In a reciprocal interpellation, the audience cries the slogan, “the people united will never be defeated” and Alfonsín repeats it as a maxim that guarantees the future of democracy. The end is one expected by all. Alfonsín’s campaign had been constructed around the Preamble to the Constitution of Argentina, recited, as the president himself says, as a “secular creed”. His first speech as president before the Argentines closes with the Preamble being chanted by the crowd. The voices of the president and those of the people merge: the democratic bond between representatives and the represented, broken by years of repression, starts to be stitched back together.

In the epilogue to his extensive inaugural speech to the Legislative Assembly that day, Alfonsín appeared to resort to omission in order to excuse himself from “overabundant words” due to the evidence of a “shared and unanimous... civic emotion”. “The circumstance”, he said immediately “is not conducive to rhetoric”, as it is “time for action – fruitful, determined, committed and immediate action. It is time to do, to do well, to do what the Republic demands and what the people expect”. If, on the one hand, the first steps of the radical government, days later, in practice underpinned the course set out through discourse: a repeal of the military Self-Amnesty Law, an order to prosecute the leaders of the guerrilla organisations and the members of the three military juntas, and the creation of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), the fact remains that, in a climate of huge social expectation, the new president began to paraphrase Austin; to make democracy with words.

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**C**ompatriots: today we all start a new era in Argentina. We begin a period that will undoubtedly be difficult, because we all have the enormous responsibility of ensuring, today and for all times, democracy and respect for human dignity in Argentina. (*Ovation*)

(“The people united will never be defeated”, *chanted by the audience*).

We know these are hard and difficult times, but we do not have a single doubt that we Argentines will take off, we will succeed and we will create the country we deserve. And we will be able to do so not by the grace of enlightened rulers but by what is being sung in this square, because the people united will never be defeated.

A happy circumstance would have it that today, when the Argentines are starting this stage of a hundred years of freedom, peace and democracy, it is Human Rights Day. (*Applause*) And therefore we want to make a commitment once again: we will work categorically and decisively for the dignity of man, to whom we must give freedom, but also justice, because the defence of human rights does not end with the preservation of life, but includes the battle we are absolutely determined to wage against misery and poverty in our nation.

This is just a salute, and the celebration of Argentine democracy would not have been complete – at least not for me – had I not had the opportunity to meet with you again to confirm with you once again that I am the servant of all of you, the most humble of Argentines. (*Ovation*)

And to commit again to work together with all of you in order to achieve the objectives we have preached about throughout the whole of Argentina, and for all of us to manifest those objectives that the men who gave us nationality present to us as a mandate, and which we now know is at our fingertips.

Because together we will form national unity, consolidate national peace, guarantee justice, provide for common defence, promote general welfare and secure the benefits of freedom for ourselves, our posterity and for all those in the world who wish to dwell on Argentine soil. (*Chanted by the audience*)

*Translated from Spanish (Argentina) by Clara Tilve.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription by Florencia Magnanego, from the audio of the video available on <http://www.radionacional.com.ar/?p=38695>.