

THE CONGRESS INTERRUPTED

1955-1983

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On 16 September 1955, a coup d'état overthrew Juan Domingo Perón and ushered in one of the most unstable periods of Argentina's institutional life. Since then and for almost thirty years, Argentina would experience a cycle of interruptions to democracy, de facto governments, proscriptions and brief attempts at constitutional normalcy. The Congress—the main symbol of popular sovereignty—was shut down four times (in 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1976), subjected to censorship or replaced by advisory bodies without legitimacy. Its history throughout that long period is also the history of a society that swayed between hope and frustration, between a regained voice and an imposed silence.

The self-proclaimed “Liberating Revolution” (1955-1958) established a military government that persecuted every trace of Peronism. Legislative seats were emptied, party symbols were banned and the institutions were placed under intervention. Labor unions were outlawed and constitutional guarantees were suspended. In people's homes, politics became a dangerous topic: it was spoken of in hushed tones, with the windows closed and records of marches or speeches were hidden behind encyclopedias. With parliamentary life suspended, decision-making was concentrated in the hands of the Executive Branch and the de facto governments, which ruled by decree and relied on a National Advisory Board that, although including political parties, lacked democratic legitimacy. The absence of Congress not only meant the lack of political debate, but also the loss of a place where the Nation discussed its course and where social demands were translated into laws.

With the electoral victory of Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962), the country attempted a return to legality. The new president had counted on the implicit support of Peronism, still outlawed, and that circumstance marked the fragility of his administration from the very beginning. On the one hand, he had to respond to the expectations of a large portion of the electorate that had supported him with the hope of a true return to democracy; while, on the other hand, he could not strain his relations with the military sector too much, as it still controlled crucial instruments of power.

The Congress resumed its activities with a reformist momentum. Bills that sought to modernize the economic structure of the country and broaden its industrial base were debated. During those years, key laws were enacted—such as those promoting oil production, foreign investment, and the creation of scientific and technological institutions that still exist today: The National Scientific and Technical

Research Council (CONICET), the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA) and the National Institute of Industrial Technology (INTI). In the chambers, the debates on development, technical education, planning and fiscal balance shaped the legislative agenda. The speeches delivered by deputies showed that Congress was attempting to balance economic rationality with the demands for social justice. Yet its vitality had limits: political proscription constrained the debates and the pressure of the Armed Forces was felt in every vote. During those years, Congress was, in manner of speaking, a testing ground for a constrained democracy, where the popular will had to be expressed within the limits deemed acceptable by the military authorities.

The overthrow of Frondizi in March of 1962 triggered an unprecedented institutional crisis. Congress, which sought to uphold constitutional legality, was caught in a conflict of power vacuum: following the president's arrest—and with Vice President Alejandro Gómez having resigned years earlier—the line of succession fell to the interim president of the Senate, José María Guido. With the support of the Supreme Court, which endorsed his taking office in the name of institutional continuity, Guido took the presidency under military tutelage. A few weeks later, he dissolved the Congress and declared the federal intervention of all the provinces, thus ending the brief attempt at upholding legality and cementing the subordination of the civilian power to the discretion of the Armed Forces.

However, after institutional normalization and the election of Arturo Illia (1963-1966), the Congress regained prominence. It held regular sittings with an atmosphere of deliberation that evoked the finest parliamentary tradition. Debates on the Medicines Act, the annulment of oil contracts, labor protection and public education reflected an active Congress striving to restore the institutional fabric of the republic. In the House of Deputies, there was an atmosphere of reconstruction: speeches appealed to ethics, transparency and the idea that politics had to become a public service once again.

At the same time, legislative activity reflected a country undergoing urbanization, where television was entering homes, the labor movement was growing and university students were assuming a lead role. In the halls of Congress, journalists, students and political activists mingled and they witnessed long and fascinating sittings. Parliamentary life was intense but fragile: the shadow of military power loomed over every initiative. When General Juan Carlos Onganía overthrew the constitutional government in June 1966, his first step was, once again, to dissolve the Congress. In 1973, after six years of dictatorship and eighteen years of proscription, the

return to democracy restored the Congress to its full significance without any kind of constraint to the will of the people expressed in the ballot box. The election of Héctor Cámpora (1973), followed by the return of Perón (1973-1974), revived political life with an unprecedented intensity. The reopened Congress became both a symbol and a stage for collective hope: its seats were filled with labor leaders, youthful activists, intellectuals, representatives of the new provincial parties and various factions of Peronism. Women, whose entry into Congress had begun in 1951 but whose representation had dwindled to a minimum during the 1960s, repopulated the Congress. The opening sitting of 1973 was a popular celebration: the balconies of the palace were packed with people and rounds of applause from the halls frequently interrupted the speeches.

During those brief years, Congress passed laws for historical redress, restored labor rights and debated wealth distribution. It also enacted laws on education, housing and health, seeking to expand social coverage. The committees on Budget, Labor Legislation and Constitutional Affairs became spaces where different ideological traditions converged. However, coexistence was not without difficulty: political violence, internal clashes and pressures from armed groups overflowed institutional channels. Nevertheless, the Congress still attempted to be a place where plurality could find a legal channel in the face of conflict.

The death of Perón on 1 July 1974 once again plunged the country's institutions into uncertainty. During the presidency of María Estela Martínez (1974-1976), although the Congress continued holding sittings, its debates were marked by fear and the crisis that permeated society. Growing violence, censorship and economic decline limited the scope of the actions of legislators and politics as a whole, while the Armed Forces regained prominence in key state decisions.

The coup of 24 March 1976 once again brought parliamentary life to an end. The palace of Congress was occupied by military forces, seats were left empty and committees were dissolved. In its place, the Military Junta established a Legislative Advisory Commission that issued rules without debate or representation. The democratic legitimacy of this so-called legislative body was, evidently, nonexistent. Provincial constitutions were suspended and the right to political participation was annulled. The dictatorship suppressed public expression: speeches and journals of House sittings vanished, the names of persecuted legislators were erased and silence was imposed. At the same time, a structure of illegal repression was established that would lead Argentina to one of the darkest periods in its history: State terrorism. Kidnappings and forced disappearances became systematic

practices aimed at eliminating all forms of political, social or cultural dissidence. Thousands fell victim to a campaign of repression that sought to strike fear and impose silence as tools for control.

Yet within society, the memory of a debating Congress endured. Each time the doors of Congress were closed, the citizens found ways to keep the idea of representation alive. In the labor unions that resisted even in illegality, in clandestine university courses and in the silent rounds of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo survived the conviction that the country had to speak, debate and legislate freely once again. By the early 1980s, the dictatorship began to crumble under its own weight. The economic crisis, foreign debt and the defeat in the Malvinas War accelerated its downfall. The streets once again filled with demonstrations and the voices silenced for years began to call for free elections. When the 1983 elections were finally announced, the return of Congress became the most visible symbol of democratic recovery. On 10 December 1983 with the swearing-in of President Raúl Alfonsín and the reopening of both Houses, Congress resumed its natural role: being the place where the nation reflects upon itself.

The history of Congress between 1955 and 1983 is one of interrupted persistence. Amid dissolutions and returns, imposed silences and reclaimed words, the Congress kept the idea that dialogue and the law are the pillars of the republic alive. Each reopening was a symbolic act of restoration; each sitting, an act of faith in democracy. When, in 1983, the lights of the debating chamber were turned on once again, it was not only an institution resuming its course: it was the restoration of the people's faith in the power of their own voice. At the time, nobody knew that 10 December would mark the beginning of the longest period of uninterrupted democracy in our history. It was the birth of a new Argentina, one that left terror and darkness behind to rebuild itself upon the values of freedom, justice and memory.

