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First Argentina judge convicted for 'dirty war' crimes

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Victor Brusa is the first former judge to be convicted in Argentina's crackdown on dirty war criminals. He was sentenced to 21 years in prison on Tuesday for committing crimes against humanity during the 1979-1983 military dictatorship. According to Professor of Latin-American Studies Michiel Baud, the conviction reflects Argentineans' increasingly balanced view on the dirty war. "The whole society is now subjected to the question of guilt, not just the military."

Systematic plan

The Federal Court of Santa Fe found Brusa legally responsible for eight crimes during his tenure as judge. The crimes were all committed as part of a systematic plan by military leaders to defeat leftist opponents, and are therefore deemed crimes against humanity.

Five former police officers were also sentenced by the same court to between 19 and 23 years in prison for their role in kidnapping and torture cases during the military regime.

Brusa's sentence follows eleven years after Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon issued the international arrest warrant against him, Argentinean newspaper Página 12 reports. "This is definitely an important conviction from the point of view of the separation of powers, which will contribute significantly to the dirty war discussion."

Black and white view

Professor Baud told Radio Netherlands Worldwide that Brusa's conviction mirrors a broader development in Argentina. "Over the last twenty years, instead of solely depicting the military as the baddies and the rest of society as innocent, people are increasingly focusing on the entire social system, including the judiciary and even the Catholic Church."

Argentineans are swapping their simple black-and-white view on the dirty war for a more balanced social analysis, he says. "They want to find out what factors contributed to the dirty war and made it possible. The whole society is now subjected to the question of guilt." Baud agrees that the sentences issued by Brusa after the dirty war will now probably also be subject to discussion. "The question is: can a pattern be discerned in the verdicts he issued until 2005? There has been a so-called 'dirty war after the dirty war'. It seems likely that this judge has been part of that phenomenon."

Reappointed

Brusa was reappointed a judge in Santa Fe after the fall of the military junta. Despite early witnesses' reports on Brusa's activities in clandestine detention centres during the dictatorship, he was sacked years later, in 2000, because he was found guilty of hampering an investigation into a hit-and-run accident in 1997 in which he ran over a swimmer with his motorboat and fled.

He was arrested in 2005 after the government revoked an amnesty law for dirty war crimes. Between 9,000 and 30,000 people were killed or disappeared during the dictatorship of president Jorge Vidéla.

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