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Argentina braces for massive 'silent' march to protest prosecutor's death

One month after public prosecutor Alberto Nisman was found dead in his home, thousands plan to turn out in anger over the lack of progress in the case. Mr. Nisman died the day before testifying against the government in a 1994 case.

By Whitney Eulich, Staff writer | FEBRUARY 18, 2015

Buenos Aires

Hundreds of thousands of Argentines across the country are expected to march silently this evening to draw attention to the nation's troubled justice system, one month to the day after the mysterious death of public prosecutor Alberto Nisman.

"The silence signifies the peace we need as a society and that we need as investigators looking for the truth," Guillermo Marijuan, who is organizing the march along with other public prosecutors, told La Nacion, a local newspaper.

Argentina has been swept up by the murky details surrounding Mr.

Nisman. He died from a gunshot wound in his apartment the night before he was to testify against the government for allegedly covering up Iranian involvement in an unsolved 1994 terrorist attack on a Jewish community center here.

His death has highlighted deep political rifts within the country as well as distrust in the justice system. Questions have emerged over the professionalism of the investigation, including potential contamination of the crime scene and how certain evidence was initially overlooked – including a draft warrant seeking the president's arrest that was found in a trash can in Nisman's apartment.

"One thing people have taken from this crisis is that the justice system needs an overhaul," says Maria Esperanza Casullo, a political scientist at the Argentina's National University at Rio Negro.

Public opinion of Argentina's judicial system lands it toward the bottom of regional rankings, just ahead of impunity-plagued Mexico. Only about 37 percent of Argentines say they have confidence that guilty individuals will be punished, according to 2014 data from Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project's AmericasBarometer. That is in part because of a long history of political and executive pressure on judges and prosecutors in Argentina, says Pablo Secchi, head of Argentina's chapter of Transparency International, Poder Ciudadano.

"The risk is that citizens don't feel like the system serves them," Mr. Secchi says. "Impunity allows corruption and weak institutions to flourish."



Men walk pass posters that read in Spanish 'Demand justice to justice,' in reference to a march organized by federal prosecutors demanding justice after the death of special prosecutor Alberto Nisman a month ago, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, last week. (Rodrigo Abd/Associated Press)

Indeed, Bernardo Minkas, sitting at a lunch counter in Buenos Aires on a recent afternoon, munching on fried pork *milanesa* and French fries and watching the latest news, is skeptical anything will get done. "How can we expect this [Nisman] case to be resolved if we can't even solve the case that got him killed?" he asks.

He's referring to the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center, which killed 85 people and injured more than 300. Mr. Minkas says he's following developments in Nisman's case, but can't help but wonder if "in 20 years, this too will still be unresolved."

"For me, this is bigger than Nisman," says Kathia Carvalhais, walking her dogs in a crowded park. "I have friends who are prosecutors and I fear for them." She plans to attend tonight's march, but won't go near the heart of the event. "I think it could get violent," Ms. Carvalhais says.

Last week, a four-person team of prosecutors was assigned to pick up where Nisman left off on his investigation of the AMIA bombing. A separate prosecutor, Gerardo Pollicita, chose to move forward with Nisman's allegations against the government, formally accusing President Kirchner of involvement in a cover-up.

That's put her government squarely on the defensive.

"The Argentine people should know that we're talking about a vulgar lie ... of a strategy of political destabilization and the biggest judicial coup in the history of Argentina to cover up for the real perpetrators of the crime," Cabinet Chief Jorge Capitanich said Friday.

Tonight's main march, in the capital, will travel the short distance from Congress to the Plaza de Mayo, stopping directly in front of the Casa Rosada, the executive mansion. Kirchner has made oblique references to the march, saying last week that "They always like the silence. You know why? Because they have nothing to say or because they can't say what they think."

Participants may not carry political signs or banners, and Security Secretary Sergio Berni announced Tuesday that police officers surrounding the march route won't have weapons in order to avoid any possible provocations. In addition to judges and lawyers, high-profile opposition politicians have said they will join the march, as well as family members who lost loved ones in the 1994 bombing. Not all of Nisman's colleagues are on board with the march, however, with some referring to participation as unethical.

Smaller gatherings are expected to take place in more than 20 cities across Argentina as well as in 13 countries.

"Try to imagine an attorney general in the United States going to the public and saying 'the system is broken and we need to fix it. Come march with me,'" says Ms. Esperanza Casullo, the political scientist, referring to the fact that an attorney general for Buenos Aires is an organizer. "This is historic."