

CHILE: DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT

by Paul E. Sigmund

At a time when countries in the Southern Cone of Latin America are returning to constitutional democracy (Argentina in 1983, Uruguay in 1984, and gradually Brazil, where indirect presidential elections are scheduled for January 15), the trend is being reversed in Chile. After eighteen months of protests by trade unions and opposition parties, Chile's military ruler, Augusto Pinochet, has imposed a state of siege, exiled hundreds of Chileans to remote areas of the country, heavily censored the press and radio, conducted police roundups and security checks of lower-class areas of Santiago, and, to repress a protest demonstration, called out the Army at the end of November. His interior minister has also taken action against a leading churchman, incurring the wrath of the newly appointed moderate archbishop of Santiago, Juan Francisco Fresno.

Why the sudden crackdown? Pinochet himself would probably answer, "Why not?" He argues that he is operating in accordance with the provisions of the 1980 constitution, which received the approval of 67 per cent of the Chilean electorate in a hastily called plebiscite. Pinochet had rewritten the draft constitution submitted by his advisory Council of State so that the plebiscite on the constitution would also elect him president for the period ending 1989 and would hold out the possibility of his reelection by plebiscite to an additional eight-year term, as well as the possibility that no congressional elections would be called until 1990.

Pinochet, appealing to the legalistic mentality of the Chilean Armed Forces and to their fear of communism (the Constitution itself contains a provision that makes it easy to outlaw the Chilean Communist party), argues that his present actions are undertaken to defend the 1980 constitution against subversion. Here he is aided by the Communists, who have publicly declared their dedication to armed struggle, abandoning the Party's long-time adherence to the *via pacifica*. The centrist Democratic Alliance, which ranges from a republican Right to several varieties of socialism, have played into his hands by rejecting the constitution and calling for a new constitutional conven-

tion. The Communists, along with a portion of the Socialist party, not only have organized their own front group, the Popular Democratic Movement, but also established a group to carry on armed resistance, calling it the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front, after a guerrilla leader at the time of Chile's independence.

In 1983 it had seemed for a while that the rising tide of opposition, which for the first time included a significant section of the Chilean Right, might force Pinochet's resignation. In August of that year Pinochet appeared to have his back to the wall. Twenty-four people had been killed in protest demonstrations, making it necessary to call out seventeen thousand troops. However, Pinochet took two steps to overcome the immediate threat to his rule: He appointed as minister of the interior the former head of the National party, Sergio Onofre Jarpa, who announced the initiation of a dialogue with the opposition regarding the possibility of accelerating the congressional elections; and he established committees to draw up an election law and regulations for legalizing political parties. Archbishop Fresno strongly supported the dialogue, but the meetings between Jarpa and the opposition had no effect except that of weakening the opposition.

With the revelation early in 1984 of his involvement in some dubious real estate transactions, Pinochet faced another crisis. Yet once again he survived, and by September, 1984, he felt strong enough to take back his promises of early elections. Just when the Navy and Air Force members of the Armed Forces Junta that serves as the legislature (and, in the military's view, as the legitimizer of his rule) had begun to press him on the issue, there came a wave of bombings organized by the extreme Left. Thereupon the Armed Forces lent their support to the crackdown that Pinochet had always desired.

The crackdown followed the resignation of Pinochet's cabinet. Given the lack of progress in Jarpa's program, it should have signaled the departure of the minister of the interior. But Jarpa stayed on, alluding to a threat posed by conversations in Rome between Chilean bishops and Chile's opposition in exile. Citing evidence of similar contacts with subversive potential, Jarpa then withdrew permission for the return to Chile of the Reverend Ignacio Gutierrez, the head of the archdiocesan Vicariate of Solidarity, which provides relief and legal support to victims of government repression. The reimposed censorship was

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extended to the Church-owned radio station, and even to the statements of Archbishop Fresno himself. Compelled to use church pulpits at Sunday mass to denounce the crackdown as "a serious retrogression," Fresno attacked the government criticisms of the bishops, the banning of Father Gutierrez, and the government's prohibition of media coverage of the statements he himself had made after visiting a shantytown raided by the police. He called for a day of prayer, reflection, and fasting on November 23, and expressed his profound concern about the cycle of "subversive violence and repressive violence" in the country. He also called for government action "to make possible the development of a consensus on the present and future evolution of the country."

MAXIMUM PRESSURE

Fresno's concern was shared by the United States embassy. Ambassador James Theberge, recalling the situation in Nicaragua when he served as ambassador there in 1975, went to Washington to participate in a multiagency review of policy toward Chile. Its conclusion, as reported in the *New York Times* on December 2, was that maximum pressure should be exerted on both the government and the opposition to reopen negotiations about a timetable for the

return to democracy. Theberge and others feared that continued intransigence by Pinochet would lead to "another Nicaragua" in Chile—that Pinochet's refusal to step down would give the extreme Left a chance to apply their theories of armed struggle, Sandinista-style.

Chile is not Nicaragua, and its Armed Forces do not in any way resemble Somoza's hated *Guardia Nacional*. But were the upper and middle classes to become convinced that Pinochet is determined to hold onto power indefinitely—as Somoza tried to do—a process of national repudiation of personal rule, such as took place in Nicaragua (and in Batista's Cuba), might well set in. There is another possibility: that the crackdown, if effective, might lead the military to ask Pinochet to demonstrate that he is committed to a return to democracy.

How long can Pinochet stay on, especially in the face of the hemisphere-wide trend toward democracy? Despite speculation that he plans to manipulate the constitution in order to remain in power until 1997, the process of repoliticization has gone so far in Chile that it is unlikely the democratic genie can be put back in the bottle. Should Pinochet demonstrate once again his incredible capacity for survival, however, he would set the stage for that genie's more violent release in the future. W.V.

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