On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, overthrew the Marxist-dominated government of Salvador Allende in a bloody coup. This summer, exactly a decade later, onlookers had a sense of déjà vu. Once again Chile was on the front pages of the world press, and once again Santiago’s hotels were filled with foreign correspondents waiting for the government to topple.

In April had come the copper workers’ call for a general strike. On the eleventh of each month since May there had been massive anti-Pinochet demonstrations—most of them peaceful, some not so peaceful, but all marked, as the anti-Allende protests of old, by the hugging of empty pots to protest the economic situation and to call for a change of government. In July the United States and Common Market countries had issued statements deploving the imprisonment of the head of the Christian Democratic party, Gabriel Valdés, for financing the distribution of leaflets that called for nonviolent protest. In August, President Pinochet had called out eighteen thousand troops to put down that month’s demonstration, with the result that thirty people were killed.

A third of the Chilean work force was unemployed or on a daily dole that ranged from 75c (Minimum Employment Program) to $1.50 (Program for Heads of Households). The regime was so discredited and disliked that even its former right-wing supporters wanted change. Hopeful and expectant, the world awaited Chile’s return to the democratic rule it had enjoyed throughout most of its history.

We are still waiting. As so often in the last ten years, predictions of Pinochet’s political demise have been proved wrong. By a combination of carrot (liberalization moves and the promise of elections) and stick (repression of protests by tear gas, random shootings in the shantytowns, and a propaganda campaign against vandalism and violence), Pinochet has reclaimed the offensive against the opposition and has even regained some of the support he had lost. As recently as last July, the odds were against his surviving until 1989, the end of the “constitutional” term to which he was elected in a hastily called plebiscite in 1980. Now, despite a clear majority in opposition (the latest poll shows 51 per cent favoring an immediate return to democracy and 36 per cent opposed), Pinochet seems to have a new lease on life.

SURVIVAL UNDER PRESSURE
This is not the first time that Pinochet has overcome political difficulties. In the four years following the coup he concentrated political and military power in his own hands and downgraded the role of the Air Force, Navy, and National Police in the governing junta, using the dreaded National Intelligence Directorate (DINA) to terrorize real or potential opponents. By 1977, however, he faced increasing opposition from the Air Force, strong pressures from the newly elected Carter government in Washington, and even a crisis of legitimacy when U.S. investigators uncovered direct links between the DINA and the murder of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier in downtown Washington. Pinochet’s response was to reorganize the DINA, fire its head, promise a return to constitutional government, and call a plebiscite to demonstrate his popular support.

In the next four years the free-market policies of “the Chicago boys”—disciples of Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger who controlled Chile’s economic policy—produced a boom in the Chilean economy; with growth rates of around 8 per cent a year, some were speaking of “the Chilean economic miracle.” Pinochet took credit for the economic recovery, unaware of its fragile base (mostly loans from international banks that were recycling oil money at a favorable interest rate) and its adverse impact on the productive base of the Chilean economy as a result of a too rapid reduction of tariff protections and a refusal to devalue the peso. Pinochet also delivered on his promise of a return to constitutionalism: By hastily rewriting and submitting to a plebiscite a draft constitution produced by right-wing jurists and the advisory Council of State, he had himself elected president until 1989 (with the possibility of reelection until 1997) and secured “transition” powers for his government. These included the right to expel Chileans from the country without judicial review, to censor books and publications, to impose states of emergency and curfews, and to delay legislative elections until 1990. (The Council of State’s draft had called for elections in 1985.)

In March, 1981, when he entered the newly rebuilt presidential palace, which had been bombed during the ’73 coup, Pinochet was at the height of his power. In his inaugural address he reminded his audience that while after the coup “Chile stood alone” in its militant anticommunism and its belief in the free market, now the rest of the world had come around to Chile’s point of view. In addition to
the earlier claim that he had saved the country from Communist dictatorship, he could claim the economic achievements of a free-market system and the endorsement of his rule by 67 per cent of the voters (however dubious the circumstances of the plebiscite). Yet within eighteen months of his speech, each of these claims was undermined and Pinochet was in deep trouble.

His troubles began with the economy. In mid and late 1981 an accumulation of bad loans and questionable financial practices led to the collapse of a number of banks and other financial institutions, requiring their takeover by the government. An overvalued peso, which made Chile’s exports expensive and the cost of imports artificially low, brought on the wave of bankruptcies in industry and agriculture that soon followed. As a result, Chile slid into a deep depression and 1982 ended with a record drop in Gross National Product: – 14 per cent. Pinochet resisted devaluation until June, 1982, and afterwards replaced the “Chicago boys” with a series of finance ministers who could do little to stem the flight of capital, skyrocketing external and internal indebtedness, and soaring unemployment.

The economic problems had political effects. The fragile (and technically illegal) opposition parties finally joined together in a “Democratic Alliance” to press for the return of democracy. Here were included representatives of all the parties but those of the extreme Left—the Violentistas MIR and the Communists, which, after the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, had recently endorsed a policy of “armed struggle” in Chile—and the corporatist Right. The labor unions, previously divided among the powerful copper workers, the Left-oriented National Trade Union Coordinating Committee, and the Christian Democratic Workers Union, formed a single National Labor Command. Anti-Pinochet jokes circulated in Santiago’s exclusive private schools as the president, in an unsuccessful appeal to populism, attacked “the aristocratic elites” who thought they had a right to rule the country.

With each month the protests escalated, demonstrating that all sectors of society—not only the poor, who had borne the brunt of the economic retreatment, but also the upper and middle classes—shared a belief that it was time to return to democratic rule. That belief was reinforced by trends among Chile’s neighbors. In 1980, Peru, after twelve years of military rule, had returned to democracy. In chronically unstable Bolivia the civilians who had been ousted by the military returned to power. In Brazil free elections were held for all but the post of president, while in Argentina the first free elections since 1973 were set for the end of October. Soon only Chile and Stroessner’s Paraguay seemed to be resisting the democratic tide.

Yet Pinochet held on. This was, after all, a military government, and he still had the support of the Army. Ask Chileans to characterize their armed forces and they are like to reply that Chile has an American air force, a British navy, and a Prussian army. (Indeed, the Army was professionalized by a Prussian, one Emil Koeper, in the late nineteenth century, and it is starting to seem the goose step still employed in military parades.) Other adjectives that are frequently employed in describing the Army are “hermetically sealed,” “hierarchic,” and “vertical” —and Pinochet has been able to exploit this tradition to maintain that branch’s loyalty and retire or send abroad any potential rivals. Because of the Army’s policy of automatic retirement, he now has fifteen years’ seniority over all but one of the other generals. Among that group are a number who were cadets at the Military School when Pinochet was a teacher there.

REPOLITIZATION

While Army loyalty explains how Pinochet could survive the extreme pressure from Chilean society in the May-September period, it does not explain how he has been able to make what appears to be a partial recovery in popularity during the last two months. This can only be attributed to a quite astute policy of liberalization, promised democratization, and deliberate class polarization.

The liberalization began halfheartedly at the end of 1982, when a few prominent exiles were permitted to return the country. More recently, even larger numbers have been allowed to return, including the head of the Human Rights Commission, expelled twice for his criticism of human rights abuses. In addition, the censorship of books has ended, the right to hold public meetings has been restored, the curfew has been lifted, and the government has avoided recourse to the emergency powers contained in the “transition” sections of the new constitution.

The most important move in the direction of democratization was the appointment in mid-August of an old-line, right-wing politician, Sergio Onofre Jarpa, as minister of interior. On taking office, Jarpa offered to engage in dialogue with the opposition, a view to holding congressional elections in advance of the constitutionally fixed date of 1990. These such dialogue have taken place, though without much progress. The government has made clear that the resignation of Pinochet before the end of his term in 1989 is a nonnegotiable item; but recent discussions have focused on arrangements for meetings of the Council of State and the Commission on Organic Laws to legalize and regulate political parties and elections. The dialogue has also created some tensions within the Democratic Alliance: The Socialists have been reluctant to hold discussions with what they regard as an illegitimate government and one that seems only to be playing for time.

Jarpa has managed to exploit the Socialists’ ambivalence. Since the Socialists were allied with the Communists from 1957 to 1973, he called for a clearer definition of the Alliance’s attitude toward the Communist party and has cited statements by the Socialist representatives concerning the need for unity of working-class parties. The Communists, for their part, although outlawed by the 1980 constitution, have conducted a press conference and formed a front group, the Popular Democratic Movement, and a few Socialists and Left Christians have joined.

The Communist issue has been exploited in yet another way. When the poblaciones, the shantytowns, reacted to shootings by the police, by the Army, and by right-wing groups affiliated with the Intelligence Service—throwing stones, overturning cars, and burning tires—the government press denounced the vandalism and violence and sought to frighten upper-class groups with stories of imminent Communist-led uprisings among the poor. In fact, based on my own interviews in these areas in September, it has been unemployed young people (the jobless rate is between 70 and 80 per cent), not the Communist party, who are most active in the protests.
The traditional and corporatist Right has now begun to respond to the prospect of a political opening, initiating several political structures and committees that are likely to form the nucleus of one or more future progovernment political parties. Returning to a frequent theme that he had failed to follow up, Pinochet is calling for the formation of a "civic movement" in support of his government—and this time it might actually be formed. In September, Pinochet reluctantly indicated that the government was considering the possibility of a plebiscite to move up the date of the congressional elections.

What has happened in recent months is a repoliticization of Chile—a return to the old national sport of analyzing alternative political scenarios and evaluating who is winning and who is losing from day to day. The consensus of the moment is that the opposition has lost some ground to the government counteroffensive, and internal divisions have begun to appear in the broad opposition alliance. However, the economic situation remains desperate. The pressure for a further opening should be irresistible, if only because it now seems to have the support of the Armed Forces. And Pinochet still faces the difficult task of maneuvering and manipulating the newly mobilized forces in Chile to maintain himself in power until 1989. If the polls are to be believed, he will be able to persuade the third of the Chilean population which consistently votes conservative that he is the only alternative to communism and chaos; but the argument is much less convincing to the rest of the country than in the past.

ALTERNATIVES

The question for the future is whether it will remain convincing to the Armed Forces. Here, following what may well be a lengthy period of dialogue, negotiation, and maneuvering, there are two possible scenarios: One resembles recent developments in Brazil, with a controlled opening that retains some, or considerable, power for the president until 1989; the other looks somewhat more like Argentina or Peru, with an increasingly discredited regime finally yielding to the demand for a genuinely representative civilian government, perhaps with a continuing role for representatives of the Armed Forces.

Under either scenario there will be furious maneuvering for advantage between the Right and the Christian Democratic-dominated center. While the opposition Democratic Alliance seems now to have the votes, the Right has the access to power. And indeed, given the political skill Jarpa so amply demonstrated when he was head of the right-wing National party during the Allende years, the Right may succeed in outmaneuvering the opposition—whether by the use of appointed legislators (called "bionic senators" in Brazil), by an electoral law designed to its advantage, or by alliances with the Armed Forces that allow them to dominate any political opening—even, if necessary, forcing Pinochet out of office.

If there is genuine movement toward civilian rule, there are other possibilities as well. Internal squabbling and deadlock among the civilians, when combined with leftist-inspired violence, could provoke another coup. Yet if Chile in the 1930s, Venezuela and Colombia in the 1950s, and Spain, Peru, and Ecuador in the 1970s are to serve as examples, civilian politicians can work together to build on democratic foundations.

Can the United States do anything to assist this process? At the very least it should avoid such public expressions of support for Pinochet as the highly publicized visit of Jeane Kirkpatrick in August, 1981. In addition, the Congress should resist administration pressure to lift the ban on military aid to Chile, since neither of the conditions the Congress has set for certification—progress in human rights and cooperation in the prosecution of Orlando Letelier's murderers—has been met. (Indeed, according to the Chilean Human Rights Commission, there has been a marked increase in human rights violations as a result of protests.) Certification of Chile for aid after it completes the transition to civilian rule could, in fact, provide a strong incentive for the Chilean military to support a return to democracy. There is a role too for the U.S. embassy in Chile, which has already spoken out in favor of a peaceful transition and might be encouraged to offer both explicit and symbolic support of democratization in public forums. But here, as so often in the past, the U.S. role will not be decisive. Ultimately, the decision must be made by the Chileans themselves. Given their long democratic tradition, one has grounds to hope that their decision will be a wise one.