Pinochet's arrest provokes political turmoil in Chile

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Like any great political crisis, the events provoked by the arrest of General Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator, have shed light on the character of the main protagonists. In particular, the arrest has posed sharp problems for Chile's coalition government headed by President Eduardo Frei, the military and the so-called Left parties.

Despite protracted efforts by these forces—which have worked closely together since 1990 when military rule formally ended—the issues raised by the mass murders, kidnappings and political repression carried out by Pinochet and the military in the wake of their US-backed 1973 military coup have refused to die.

One expression of that fact is that last Sunday some 30,000 people, mostly young, rallied at Parque O'Higgins in the capital, Santiago, to celebrate Pinochet's arrest and demand that he be placed on trial. At the end of the event, riot police using tear gas and water cannon attacked youth. Young protesters hurled rocks and firebombs at police, tore down traffic lights and lit bonfires in the streets. Many were arrested, bringing the total arrested in anti-Pinochet demonstrations to more than 300 in the days since Pinochet's detention.

Frei's government, a partnership of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Socialist Party (PS), has condemned Pinochet's detention and demanded that British authorities uphold his diplomatic immunity. Leaders of the governing Concertacion coalition have repeatedly restated the official position that the general's arrest "has challenged the sovereignty of Chile, undermined its laws and institutions and attacked its national dignity."

In 1973 the military overthrew the government headed by Socialist Party leader Salvador Allende, who was murdered, as were tens of thousands of workers and youth, many of them members of the PS and the Communist Party. Yet the Frei government's Socialist Party faction has explicitly aligned itself with, and in fact taken the leading role in, the campaign to demand Pinochet's release. Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza, a PS leader who was exiled by Pinochet for more than a decade, is heading the government's diplomatic efforts.

The Centre-Left government, as it is termed, is seeking to maintain the fragile constitutional arrangements that the leaders of the CDU and PS, together with the openly right-wing and pro-military parties, worked out with Pinochet and the generals after the Chilean people voted in a 1988 referendum to reject continued military rule.

Under the constitution drafted by Pinochet he remains a Senator-for-Life, even though he stood down from his last remaining post, that of Army Commander-in-Chief, last March. The military continues to enjoy a protected role under the same constitution. Ten of the 48 Senate members are appointed, rather than elected, and of these five, including Pinochet, are appointed by the military. On three occasions since military rule formally ended in 1990 these appointed members have blocked attempts to abolish their entrenched political privileges.

An Amnesty Law passed in 1978 prevents the prosecution of individuals implicated in criminal acts committed between 1973 and 1978. In addition, only military courts can try men in uniform, preventing any legal reckoning for the ongoing crimes of the late 1970s and 1980s. When, in 1993, judicial authorities showed signs of investigating the years of military dictatorship, Pinochet and the military staged a show of force.

The thinness of Chilean democracy's veneer has been exposed again by the reaction to Pinochet's arrest. The government's stance has only encouraged a frenzied reaction by the military and extreme right-wing parties, all of whom could be directly implicated by the revelations that a Spanish trial might produce. The Armed Forces, the media establishment, the business leaders and the Right have lauded the official call for "national dignity".

"We appreciate the statements and stance of President Frei in this hour. He has interpreted the sentiment of the great majority of the country, particularly the Armed Forces," stated the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Ricardo Izurieta, following a specially convened closed meeting with 1,200 heads of staff and other military officials at the Metropolitan Region Army Garrison. Izurieta, Navy Commander-in-Chief admiral Jorge Arancibia and Chief of Staff vice-admiral Hernan Couyoumdjian Bergamali cancelled overseas visits to participate in such discussions.

The right-wing parties then boycotted parliament, halting its proceedings. Last Saturday they sponsored a flag-waving demonstration of some 15,000 people in a wealthy Santiago district, demanding Pinochet's release in the name of "National Dignity". Former Navy Commander-in-Chief, designated Senator Jorge Martinez Busch, called for a suspension of parliament until "the arrest of General Pinochet is resolved". He was backed by ex-Army general and designated Senator Julio Canessa, who stated that the arrest threatened "stability of the nation".

A delegation of right-wing Opposition parliamentarians from the National Renovation Party (RN) and Independent Democratic

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Union (UDI) travelled to Britain and Spain to press for Pinochet's release and hold discussions with their political co-thinkers. Speaking to a media entourage, RN leader Sergio Romero and UDI president Pablo Longueira claimed to have proof that Pinochet's arrest was part of an "international conspiracy co-ordinated by the leftwing." They presented a scenario in which Pinochet was the victim of a socialist plot that included the Spanish lawyer Baltasar Garzon, the British Labour government, PS leader Lagos and "all those Chileans who have applauded the arrest of General Pinochet".

In a thinly veiled threat of military intervention, UDI Senator Hernan Larrain warned that if the whole population did not react with nationalistic pride, the "democratic institutions" would collapse. The country would "return to the days of Popular Unity government in the 1970s"—the Allende government overthrown by Pinochet. *El Mercurio*, a daily tabloid, revealed that members of the Chilean national intelligence agencies (DINA and CNI), the secret police services that organised the death squads, concentration camps and torture chambers under Pinochet, were regrouping.

Soon afterwards right-wing Independent Senator Evelyn Matthei and RN deputies Pia Guzman and Rosa Gonzalez established a "Women's Movement for Chilean Dignity", staging a protest outside the Spanish embassy calling for boycotts of all Spanish and British goods. In Providencia, a wealthy borough in Santiago, the mayor suspended garbage collection at the Spanish embassy and, supported by 17 other mayors throughout the country, raised Chilean flags in all public areas and private residences.

These right-wing demonstrations, reminiscent of the months before the 1973 coup, have been accompanied by death threats against PS legislators and deputies such as Allende's daughter Isabel, Fanny Pollarol, Guido Girandi and Jaime Naranjo. Communist Party general secretary Gladys Marin revealed late last week that several PC members had also received threats.

Human rights activist Carmen Soria has filed a protective writ for herself and her family after receiving death threats. The daughter of Carmelo Soria, a Spanish-Chilean UN official killed in 1976, she is known for her repeated attempts to take the case to court. The government's Amnesty Law has quashed hers and many other cases.

The most revealing response to Pinochet's arrest has come from the leaders of the Socialist Party. They have sprung to Pinochet's defence. In a typical comment, one of the party's MPs, Jose Viera-Gallo, said: "If General Pinochet had asked for asylum we (the Socialist Party) would be the first in supporting his democratic right even though we disagree (with Pinochet). The problem is that he finds himself in Britain which does not accept the argument that he has diplomatic immunity."

Ricardo Lagos, the presidential candidate of the PS and the Party for Democracy (PPD), has joined hands with Frei in calling for Pinochet's release, saying that the country's democracy would not survive if the former dictator faced trial. "Chileans are irreconcilably divided and our democracy is not ready to face up to the historic questioning which a trial for human rights abuses against Pinochet would open," he said.

Lagos's predecessor, Allende, issued similar appeals for peace and national unity in the months and days leading up to his overthrow, opposing every effort by the working class to defend itself against the impending coup. This is one of the "historic questions" that Lagos and others seek to avoid.

Lagos underscored his loyalty to the "democracy" fashioned by the politicians, business chiefs and military since 1990. He condemned the suspension of parliament by the Right Opposition because it disrupted the passing of the government's budget. "I would have preferred less passion and more reason," he said. "They want to prevent the workings of the Congress and block the budget."

Such statements by the leaders of the parliamentary Left are testament to their impotence and indifference to the tens of thousands of victims of Pinochet's dictatorship. The central aim of the September 11, 1973 coup d'etat was to atomise the working class and suppress the possibility of a socialist revolution. Pinochet boasted that he had created "the only country to completely eradicate Marxist-Leninist communists and save the country from civil war".

Pinochet and the military could only succeed in 1973 because Allende's Popular Unity government, essentially a partnership between the PS and the PC, opposed and systematically blocked any independent movement of the working class, tying workers instead to the rotted façade of capitalist democracy. That similar dangers exist today was illustrated by last Sunday's anti-Pinochet rally at Parque O'Higgins.

The event was organised by the PC and the Central Workers Union, together with human rights groups. PC secretary general Marin criticised PS presidential nominee Lagos for backing Pinochet's claim of diplomatic immunity. But the rally provided a platform for speakers from the ruling coalition, including Frei's Christian Democrats, a party that embraced Pinochet's coup 25 years ago.

One of its MPs, Gabriel Ascencio, argued that Pinochet should be brought to trial abroad on the basis that there was no question of bringing the tyrant and his generals to justice in Chile itself. "If we cannot judge Pinochet in Chile, then our moral and ethical responsibility is to assist whatever court can judge Pinochet," the MP said.

The obvious question is: why hasn't Pinochet been placed on trial in Chile? To do so, the working class would have to settle accounts with all those responsible for his regime, as well as those who have shielded the generals ever since.

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