

Castro and Chile

Why Fidel opposes Pinochet's arrest

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5 November 1998

Supporters of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet have invoked the name of Cuba's Fidel Castro in their protests over Pinochet's arrest in London.

From right-wing politicians in Chile and the rest of Latin America, to the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, Pinochet's detention has prompted demands that the Cuban leader be held as well for unspecified crimes against humanity. It is suggested that the bloodbath carried out in the Chilean coup of 1973 and the reign of terror which followed were a necessary response to "subversion" instigated by the Castro regime.

The two aging figures are portrayed as intractable enemies, one waging a struggle for revolution and the other an equally uncompromising defense of the established order. This self-serving and simplistic rationalization of Pinochet's crimes is contradicted by the reaction of Fidel Castro himself to the actions of the Spanish and British authorities. The Cuban leader's response to the arrest is ambivalent at best.

Castro was in Spain when Pinochet was detained. From outset he made it clear that he was by no means enthused by the proposal to try the former dictator for mass murder. Speaking to a group of Spanish reporters in the city of Merida on October 20 he said:

"The situation has three aspects: first the moral. From a moral point of view, the arrest and the punishment are just.

"There is a second aspect, the legal aspect. I think that from the legal point of view the action is questionable.

"Third, is the political point of view. I think that this is going to create a complicated situation in Chile, because of the form in which the political process has developed there."

Castro's reaction may in part reflect concern that he himself could be arrested abroad and brought to trial for his supposed crimes. Asked that very question in Spain, he dismissed it, pointing out that he has traveled throughout the world for decades while the US government actively sought his death.

Preoccupation with his own fate is not the main consideration that determines Castro's response. Nor is it concern over the "questionable" legality of Pinochet's

arrest. (The Cuban leader cited his training more than 40 years ago at Havana University law school to buttress his argument on that score.)

As for the "moral" side of the question, this amounts to little more than revolutionary posturing. In the end, it is the "political aspect" that decides the Cuban leader's attitude toward the event. Here it is a matter of the "realpolitik" of a radical bourgeois nationalist regime, suffering from the combined impact of the collapse of its main patron, the Soviet Union, and the economic blockade imposed by US imperialism.

There are a number of immediate practical considerations for the Cuban regime, including Cuba's growing political and economic ties with Spain. Castro reportedly first heard of Pinochet's arrest while having an audience with Spain's King Juan Carlos. The highlight of his trip to the Iberian Peninsula for the Ibero-American Summit was a meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Aznar to discuss a further normalization of economic and political ties between the two countries.

Within weeks of Castro's trip to Europe, he hosted a visit to Cuba of a 70-member delegation of Spanish businessmen led by his old friend and ally Manuel Fraga Iribarne, the head of the Galician government. Fraga, a right-wing former Francoist, was one of the principal architects of the constitutional system that has prevented the leaders of Spanish fascism from being brought to trial.

Spanish capitalism is playing an increasingly prominent role in Cuba's economy, dominating much of the current expansion of the country's tourism industry and investing significantly in other areas. The Cuban regime has no interest in taking a position hostile to that of the right-wing government in Madrid and the Spanish ruling class, on an issue that has sparked a serious political crisis in Spain.

Within Latin America itself, the Castro regime has sought to cement close ties to bourgeois governments in Chile and elsewhere in search of another opening to the capitalist world market.

Castro's remarks on the "complicated situation in Chile"

provide an instructive refutation of the claims made by both his right-wing enemies and his middle class left admirers that the Cuban leader is a proponent of social revolution in Latin America.

“In the first place there is the army ... which constitutes a strong institution in this country,” Castro said in defining the Chilean situation. “There is no doubt that it will unanimously oppose [the arrest] and oppose it strongly, and it will demand from the civilian authorities ... every means to obtain the liberation of Pinochet....

“There is the Parliament, where surely the right will take a position in favor of Pinochet, and the left in the coalition government will find itself in a very difficult position: if it supports it or if it doesn’t support it. It is most probable that it will support the government; otherwise it could run the risk of a split in the coalition....

“I think that there is a danger that the coalition could split, it is one of the latent dangers; I think that this could substantially strengthen the right. What could happen? The right will unite, the left can become divided and create in this way a difficult situation in Chile, which has still not completed the process of consolidation and opening, even though they have advanced a lot.”

Castro’s remarks amount to advice to Chile’s so-called left parties to support the military and the Christian Democratic-led government in demanding Pinochet’s release and opposing any prosecution of the former dictator. The rationale for this policy is avoiding the “danger” of splitting a coalition government that is pursuing one of the most reactionary economic policies in all of Latin America.

Whether it needed Castro’s advice or not, the leadership of Chile’s Socialist Party has pursued precisely this policy, putting itself in the forefront of defending Pinochet in the name of Chilean sovereignty.

The Cuban leader’s tacit defense of the aging ex-dictator in the name of parliamentary expediency, concerns for the military’s sensibilities and the need for maintaining an alliance between the “left” and the “right,” will seem ironic only to those unfamiliar to Castro’s long record in Latin America.

While the victory of the July 26th Movement in Cuba and the subsequent abortive guerrilla adventures promoted by Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara on the Latin American continent misled a generation of youth in the direction of “guerrillism” and “armed struggle,” the Castro regime itself sought accommodation with imperialism and the bourgeois regimes of the region very early on.

In Chile itself, Castro, in conjunction with the country’s Stalinist Communist Party, played a significant role in derailing the socialist revolution. Visiting the country in November 1971, at the height of the struggle of the Chilean

working class and under conditions of growing conflict between the most militant sections of workers and the Popular Unity government of President Salvador Allende, Castro used his influence to counsel against any independent revolutionary struggle. Chile, he told the workers, was different than Cuba. Because of its long history of constitutional government, there was a distinct “Chilean road to socialism” which could take a parliamentary path.

Even as Castro gave this advice, the military and the extreme right-wing parties were making increasingly open preparations for civil war. For its part, the Allende government worked to strangle the mass movement of workers and peasants.

In the period leading up to the 1973 coup it continuously invoked the same arguments about Chile’s constitutionalism and its “democratic” and “patriotic” military. Just months before the army seized power, Allende established a “National Security Cabinet,” bringing army chiefs, including his favorite general, Augusto Pinochet, directly into the government. The military used this period to conduct nationwide raids against factories and working class neighborhoods on the pretext of searching for arms.

By the time of the September 11, 1973 coup the working class had been disarmed both politically and physically.

As history proved, the “parliamentary road” advocated by both Allende and Castro led the working class into the soccer stadiums and other makeshift prison camps where tens of thousands were murdered and tortured.

See Also:

Political lessons of the Chilean coup

Statement issued by the Fourth International on September 18, 1973

Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism

A lecture by Bill Vann



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