

Widespread demonstrations greet extradition verdict

Chilean Socialist Party seeks to rescue Pinochet

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In the wake of the British House of Lords ruling against former Chilean junta leader Augusto Pinochet, and the celebratory demonstrations that followed, the Chilean Socialist Party is seeking to save the political establishment by asking for Pinochet to be returned to Chile, supposedly to face the courts.

The court decision sparked violent clashes between anti-Pinochet protesters and the Carabineros paramilitary police in Santiago and other cities. Within two days, over 120 demonstrators had been arrested and several were injured.

On the day of the decision, Santiago was a scene of jubilation. Thousands of people demonstrated despite a government ban several weeks earlier on all protests in the city centre. The children, partners and friends of the victims of Pinochet's regime rejoiced over the televised pronouncement, which was viewed by millions in Chile and Britain.

Some initially met at the headquarters of the group of Families of the Detained/Disappeared and then flowed into the city streets. Viviana Diaz, vice president of the Families group, told the crowd: 'After all these years we may get some justice for those who were killed by Pinochet.'

Referring to the continued blackmail and death threats issued by right-wing elements and veiled frustrations in the military, Diaz said: 'The right is trying to scare people into being silent but we're not going to be silent. We've lived for 17 years walking out of our homes and not knowing if we're going to come back. We've learned to overcome the fear. We don't feel it anymore.'

By midday thousands of youth, high school and university students and workers, together with officials of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), the Communist Party and various political parties, marched through Alameda Avenue leading to Plaza Italia, historically a meeting place for the victims' families and protests. Many chanted and cheered as vehicles beeped in support of the march.

As the procession headed towards La Moneda Palace, the paramilitary police went into operation. Water cannons were used to disperse the crowds and prevent them from reaching the government building. Later, as the marchers blocked Alameda

thoroughfare, Carabineros in full riot gear lunged into the crowds. Police fired water and tear gas at the youth, who hurled stones and other objects in response. More than 20 students were arrested.

Concepcion and Valparaiso, two centres south and north of Santiago, were the sites of similar confrontations. Half a dozen youth and students from Universidad de Concepcion were detained when they blocked traffic with barricades of torched automotive tyres. A philosophy student and seven others were accused of throwing Molotov cocktails containing acid and wounding several police. Marches and vigils for the disappeared were also held in Antofagasta and Iquique, in northern Chile.

Pro-Pinochet supporters, mainly relatives, friends and right-wing parliamentarians, also demonstrated, burning British flags. They attacked the Spanish and British embassies and set bonfires outside the National Congress building in Valparaiso on Wednesday night.

That morning family and friends of the ex-dictator had gathered at the Fundacion Pinochet (Pinochet Foundation) headquarters to watch the live broadcast of the hearing. Headed by former General Luis Cortes Villa, the organisation had been collecting funds for Pinochet's release. Entrepreneurs from as far afield as Germany sent sizeable donations.

The well-dressed coterie, adamant that the Law Lords would maintain the High Court decision, turned hysterical as the court ruled in favour of extradition. The wealthy mob hurled obscenities and threats, with shouts of 'Let's burn the embassies', 'English pirates and Spanish colonists'. Several international cameramen and correspondents were injured amid cries of 'get out, you sons of whores. It's your fault! You're all part of the socialist plot against our national father!'

Augusto Pinochet Jnr issued a veiled threat, declaring 'never have the soldiers of Chile surrendered in situations like this!' Stating that the Law Lords had dealt a cruel and unjust blow against his father, he vowed to do everything to get Pinochet released.

More recently neo-Nazis and Patria y Libertad (Liberty and Fatherland), the paramilitary fascist movement of the 1970s,

have re-surfaced in Santiago. An Argentinian daily reported that these groups congregated in the past week, burning Spanish and British flags and throwing Molotov cocktails as they chanted anti-communist slogans and gave Nazi salutes.

Behind these protests, there were signs that the military and the right-wing parties were relying on diplomatic moves by the Socialist Party (PS) leaders, who are partners in the centre-left coalition government of President Eduardo Frei.

An emergency meeting of the military-controlled National Security Council (NSC) last Wednesday endorsed the government's decision to send Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza, a PS leader, to Spain and Britain. Insulza has pleaded for Pinochet's release, both on so-called compassionate grounds and on the pretence that Pinochet would face some form of judicial process in Chile.

The NSC meeting backed a call by Frei for 'all sectors of the country to contribute to total national unity'. Nonetheless, despite an official request from Frei not to make separate statements, General Ricardo Izurieta, commander-in-chief of the Army, did so, declaring that the judicial side of the case against Pinochet had ended. Izurieta said the British Labour government now had to decide.

'The resolution has caused in the institution and in all the military branches a deep frustration, indignation and disquiet, as a result of the openly unjust and humiliating (treatment) of an ex-president of the republic, ex-commander-in-chief of the Army, a senator and plenipotentiary ambassador to United Kingdom. It gravely offends the sovereignty and dignity of our fatherland.'

Izurieta initialled a proposal to declare the Spanish and British ambassadors *personas-non-grata*. A second high-ranking military assembly in just under a month was held at the Metropolitan Region Army Garrison, attended by the commanders-in-chief of the different military branches and over 1,500 high ranking Army officers.

Yet it was the PS and Party for Democracy (PPD) leaders that played the crucial role in coming to Pinochet's rescue, undertaking a further shift in their position. Their joint presidential candidate Ricardo Lagos has over the past month zigzagged between backing the government's stance of opposing Pinochet's extradition on nationalist grounds and suggesting that he was indifferent to Pinochet's fate.

Now Lagos said was ready to travel to London to have Pinochet returned to Chile, claiming that Pinochet could be brought before the courts. He said: 'I understand and respect the sentiments of the victims who see in this decision a possibility of obtaining truth and justice after 25 years of waiting. At the same time I have the conviction that it is better for our country that Pinochet return to face our courts.'

Lagos urged all Chileans to 'maintain a state of calm, unity and maturity. I assure that the responsible actions of the government... can take us to a better solution of the present conflict.'

Pinochet Foundation president Hernan Briones and right-wing Union Democratica Independiente (UDI) senator Beltran Urenda said Lagos's gestures were a positive step. 'Happily we would accept the assistance of Ricardo Lagos... We will accept, appreciate and applaud as Chileans that undoubtedly such an action would have a positive affect for reconciliation of the country.'

The objective of these manoeuvres is to negotiate a deal with the British authorities to release Pinochet so he can be judged in Chilean civilian courts. The prospect being advanced is that the judicial system in Chile will be reformed. At the moment virtually all cases concerning the events from 1973 to 1978 are referred to the military courts under an Amnesty Law protecting the military. Civilian courts to date have simply washed their hands of these cases by declaring themselves 'incompetent'.

This is precisely the framework deliberately established by the Christian Democrat and Socialist politicians when military rule formally ended in 1990. As Viviana Diaz remarked at the anti-Pinochet demonstration in Santiago: 'It has long been known that the transition was a negotiation and the negotiated deal was that the government was not going to do anything against Pinochet or the military.'

The new, slightly modified framework would rest on carrying out minor reforms in the constitution, particularly concerning Pinochet's life position in the senate. Right-wing ministers from the right-wing National Renovation (RN) travelled to London earlier in the month to air these proposals with Pinochet.

This perspective will not resolve the political crisis engulfing Chile, however. The new facade is essentially based on attempting to resurrect the old relations that led to the crisis in the first place. Popular disillusionment with the PS, the party of slain ex-president Salvador Allende, is growing. Already, there are reports in the media that Foreign Minister Insulza has had difficulty explaining his actions to Chilean exiles in Britain. 'Insulza Traitor! You Defend a Dictator!' they angrily chanted at him at a London demonstration against his defence of Pinochet.

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