

Pinochet's return fuels political conflicts in Chile

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Augusto Pinochet's recent arrival in Chile after 16 months confinement in Britain has heightened suppressed antagonisms within the country. Victims of the former dictatorship, emboldened by Pinochet's detention, have demanded his prosecution, along with other military officers. On the other side, boosted by Pinochet's release, the former dictatorship's supporters have become more militant.

On March 11 the incumbent centre-left Concertacion coalition's Ricardo Lagos was sworn in as president in front of tens of thousands of supporters chanting "a trial for Pinochet". Lagos is the first Socialist Party president of Chile since Salvador Allende, who was murdered by the military during Pinochet's coup in 1973.

Lagos, a member of Socialist Party's Renovated faction, appealed for reconciliation with the former military junta. He claimed to speak for all Chile: "the centre, the left and the right. Civilians and the military." Yet he was drowned out several times by people demanding justice, and not reconciliation, for the 3,100 known victims of Pinochet's 17-year rule.

Similar events occurred earlier that week when several thousand anti-Pinochet demonstrators outside La Moneda presidential palace shouted "juicio al asesino" (a trial for the assassin). "That night, with water canons and batons, riot police dispersed the anti-Pinochet demonstrators, who responded to the repressive action with stones," reported the Argentine newspaper *El Clarin*.

Pinochetistas—Pinochet supporters—have also come out in force. When Pinochet arrived on March 3, he was greeted by a reception of military functionaries and members of the far-right Independent Democratic Union and the National Renovation Party. An army ensemble played German Wehrmacht (Nazi) war tunes.

At the reception, Army commander-in-chief Ricardo Izurieta let it be known that the Armed Forces would "lend their permanent support and solidarity... in all

eventualities" to their mentor. He openly aligned the military to Pinochet's rightwing supporters in the parliamentary opposition. Later that day some 5,000 Pinochetistas gathered outside the military hospital in an affluent Santiago suburb where the General underwent medical examinations.

Jose Miguel Insulza, former foreign minister and a Socialist Party leader, complained that the generals had agreed with the government that: "Pinochet was going to arrive as a sick person, received by family and friends in a far more discreet manner... Not to avoid the press, but to evaluate what to show the press."

The British Labour government had released Pinochet on grounds of ill-health. Yet Pinochet, buoyed by the welcoming party, apparently forgot his multiple physical and mental illnesses. He got off his wheelchair trouble-free and decided to stroll to greet his admirers and friends in the presence of some 200 international reporters.

Given the widespread outrage at Pinochet's release, this semi-official welcome parade caused consternation among the Concertacion leaders. The last thing they wanted audiences at home and abroad to see was that the generals continued to hold power—and would protect their leader at all costs.

"The government expressed its unhappiness with the Army's decision to organise a reception on behalf of Pinochet," said Raul Troncoso, interior minister in the outgoing Concertacion administration of Eduardo Frei. "It is absolutely rational that Pinochet's supporters go to the airport to receive the general, but it is something else to have an official reception organised by the military... We feel it is inappropriate given the situation."

Since Pinochet's arrest in 1998, the Frei government had made concerted efforts to give the world the impression that Chile was capable of trying former junta officials for their crimes. During the initial months of 1998 newly-appointed judges on the Supreme Court re-

interpreted the amnesty laws that had protected the military from prosecutions during the previous 10 years of civilian rule.

Under the new interpretation, a number of high-ranking officers were jailed. Five former generals and dozens of lower officers are in military confinement for crimes ranging from aggravated kidnap to murder.

Moreover, the military involved itself in a series of meetings with human rights lawyers and religious organisations, dubbed the “roundtable discussions,” ostensibly to locate some 1,200 victims whose bodies are still missing.

Pinochet’s triumphant return provoked a stalemate in the roundtable discussions. Human rights lawyer Roberto Garretón attributed the collapse in the talks to the “hero’s welcome” for Pinochet.

The role of the Concertación government revealed

The Concertación leaders’ complaints against the generals’ reception for Pinochet had another purpose: to deflect attention from their own role in freeing Pinochet.

An interesting article appeared on March 3 in the Chilean daily newspaper *La Tercera* establishing the intimate ties between the Concertación government, Socialist Party leader Insulza, the armed forces and the former junta.

“Changes were initiated (in June 1999) that contributed to improving relations between the military and the government,” it reported. “President Eduardo Frei reshuffled his cabinet, placing Juan Gabriel Valdés as foreign minister, although the strategist in the (Pinochet) case continued to be Insulza...”

“According to official sources, what helped maintain a closely coordinated operation between the government the military was... Frei’s promise to have Pinochet return to Chile before the end of his mandate in March. The relationship made another advance when Pablo Cabrera took on the job of ambassador in London. Cabrera established excellent links with the general.”

The article revealed Frei’s commitment to the military to have Pinochet released before he left office on March 10. With the help of the British government, Frei delivered on his promise with just seven days to spare. The report also exposes the “strategic” part played by Insulza, a leader of the Socialist Party, many of whose

members were assassinated or exiled during the military regime.

While the government is anxious to bury the Pinochet affair, a case known as the “Caravan of Death” has become a focus of the ongoing resistance to the military’s protection. It is one of 72 lawsuits currently filed against the junta. Initiated in early 1998 by Judge Juan Guzmán, who acts as judge and prosecutor in Chilean law, the case has so far led to the detention of five army officers, including one former general.

The case involves an army squadron that ordered the summary executions of 72 political prisoners in the month after the 1973 military coup. The bodies of 19 of the victims have yet to be located and identified.

The case has effectively sidestepped an amnesty provision covering the murders committed by the junta during its first five years in power. Guzmán ruled that because the bodies of 19 people had not been located, they had to be considered alive. Consequently the officers involved in the executions were detained for aggravated kidnap, and not murder, and their detention could continue for as long as the bodies were not identified.

Significantly, the Caravan of Death is one of the few cases that directly implicate Pinochet. According to Sergio Arellano Stark, the general responsible for the squadron, he was under direct orders from Pinochet to speed up the execution of political prisoners. Arellano Stark travelled to various regional centres, with a document allegedly written by Pinochet, to overturn regional commanders’ decisions and order the murders.

Pinochet is protected from prosecution due to senatorial immunity, but Guzmán is appealing to the Appeals Court to strip the former dictator of that privilege. Either side can appeal the decision in the Supreme Court.

Before any proceedings can go ahead, medical tests have to verify whether Pinochet suffers from senility or any other mental condition that would bar him from appearing in a trial. If need be, the Chilean authorities can fall back on the same defence as their British counterparts—that Pinochet is too frail to put on trial.



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