

# Chile: Struggle against a military dictator (1985 – 1988)

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**Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
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### **Conflict Summary:**

Following General Augusto Pinochet's 1973 accession to power in a bloody military coup, a movement in opposition to the dictatorship gained momentum over the next 15 years despite assassinations, torture, and the "disappearance" of over 3,000 political opponents and officials of the previous democratic government. In order to legitimize his regime, Pinochet staged a plebiscite in 1980 that created a new constitution and consolidated power in the presidency but also mandated another plebiscite in 1988 to reconfirm his tenure in office.

A grassroots nonviolent movement mobilized during the years leading up to the 1988 plebiscite, organizing opposition especially within labor organizations, universities, and the church. Innovative strategic actions that showed the breadth of popular discontent empowered people to join the resistance movement. After nationwide mobilization of voters, poll watchers, and demonstrators, along with an effective use of the media, a popular "No" vote on the plebiscite defeated the Pinochet regime, forcing the general to step down from the presidency, although he remained in control of the military until his arrest in London in 1998. Since then, gradually democratic institutions have grown and institutionalized in Chile as a consequence of nonviolent coalitions mobilizing for change.

### **Political History:**

General Pinochet took power after democratically-elected President Salvador Allende was overthrown in a military coup in 1973 that was allegedly backed by the CIA<sup>1</sup>. Pinochet's takeover included the assassination of many of Allende's top officials—and an assault on the presidential palace of La Moneda, where Allende himself was killed. The former ambassador to the United States fell victim to a car bombing in, DC. The new dictator fired military leaders, shut down newspapers, militarized the universities, and even outlawed singing in public. According to the New York Times, "more than 3,200 people were executed or disappeared and scores of thousands more were detained and tortured or exiled" during his rule (Kandell 2006).

The Roman Catholic Church, while avoiding direct opposition to the regime, nonetheless denounced human rights abuses such as murder, torture, "disappearances", illegal detention and forcible transfers (see Amnesty International 1998) and opened up political space increasingly over the period Pinochet was in power (1973-1990)<sup>2</sup>. Catholics and Protestants collaborated, along with the faith-based SERPAJ (*Servicio Paz y Justicia* ["In the Service of Peace and Justice"]), to support human rights work in the country, starting with the creation of a Committee of Cooperation for Peace, formed in October 1973 the month after the coup. When Pinochet dissolved the Committee of Cooperation for Peace, the Catholic Church organized the Vicaría de la Solidaridad that provided support for relatives of the disappeared and legal assistance to victims, soup kitchens and child-nutrition programs (Donnelly 1998: 44; cf. Loveman 1998).

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Responding to an economic crisis and widespread political repression, organized labor drew on a strong tradition of labor militancy and began showing signs of resistance early in 1983, especially in the copper mines so essential to Chile's economy. President of the National Labor Congress Rudolfo Seguel inspired the first National Day of Protest on 11 May 1983 that made opposition to the regime more visible. Originally calling for a mine worker's strike, it became clear to the organizers that such a protest would evoke a bloody response by the regime, especially after the government's troops surrounded the mines. In an ingenious tactical move, the miners called instead for a nationwide, decentralized action for all Chileans who support them to walk and drive slowly, turn lights off and on at night, not buy anything or send children to school, and at 8pm in the evening bang pots and pans. These low-risk, decentralized actions helped to dissolve people's fear and develop a sense of confidence among the opposition.

By the end of 1983, a hard-line leftist coalition, the Popular Democratic Front (MDR) and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) mounted modest violent attacks against the Pinochet regime, escalating early the next year with more than 700 bombings around the country, including attacks on subways and power pylons (Ackerman and Duval 2000: 288-289). The government responded by rounding up young men and increasing repression. The opposition splintered between radical extremists advocating violence, on the one hand, and the *Alianza Democrática*, a broadly-based nonviolent coalition. The use of violence drove some of the middle class away from participation. A nonviolent resistance continued organizing in the grassroots, however, especially the church-based SERPAJ, which cultivated a network of trained activists and developed a strategy for demonstrating against the regime. In August of 1985 key opposition leaders including eleven parties met at the urging of Cardinal Fresno and a pre-Pinochet minister Sergio Molina. A new coalition, the National Accord for Full Transition to Democracy (*Acuerda Nacional*), was formed. Inspired by Attenborough's film "Gandhi" and the Solidarity movement in Poland, protestors developed new means of protest with simple slogans like "We have clean hands", which was accompanied by people holding up their hands with their palms held outward, to priests and nuns sitting-in in front of torture venues.

Chile's long democratic history prior to Pinochet facilitated the emergence of a "Vote No!" movement in a 1988 plebiscite in which voters rejected the military dictatorship, which led the way to presidential and legislative elections in 1989. Pinochet tried to retain his dictatorship, but was unable to do so because of high-level defections in the military. After the referendum results were in, Pinochet called in the junta leaders; one of them, General Fernando Matthei Aubel, admitted to journalists along the way that they had lost. As word of his statement spread, the opposition began to celebrate. Pinochet tried to impose martial law, but his own senior military official declined to cooperate; when given a protocol to sign that would have handed all power over to Pinochet, one general tore it up in front of him, throwing it on the floor. Pinochet finally conceded and stepped down from the presidency, but in an ambiguous transition of power managed to retain control over the military until 1998, complicating the democratic transition.

## **Strategic Actions:**

Broad coalitions and nonviolent creativity helped to unseat Pinochet, starting with innovative protests organized by copper workers after a planned strike provoked a troop mobilization. As the opposition intensified, so did the repression by the regime. Resistance organizers engaged in nonviolence training (especially in the churches), public demonstrations, and grassroots protests such as slowdowns, boycotts, public singing and other symbolic actions that allowed people to express themselves but baffled the regime, which was unable to suppress them. When Pinochet allowed modest concessions prior to a 1988 plebiscite, resisters seized the opportunity, with 15-minute television spots that revealed the regime's abuses and nationwide electoral organizing and poll watching. After the "No" votes won, discrediting the Pinochet government, elections were called and the opposition defeated Pinochet in 1989, forcing him to step down.

Some specific strategic actions that the movement used were:

- Strikes and other labor actions – the Copper Mine Workers Federation and the National Workers Committee used traditional labor strikes as well as a slowdown.
- Grassroots church-based organizing – SERPAJ organized informal schools of nonviolence to transform fear and unite people by training them in the methods of nonviolent resistance, helping them think strategically and giving them evidence of other successful nonviolent campaigns.
- Identification and use of autonomous political space – although careful not to directly oppose the regime at first, the Roman Catholic Church as a relatively autonomous institution provided space for organizing and protection for victims of human rights abuses. The Cardinal of Santiago also attempted mediation between reformers and the government. The plebiscite that finally defeated Pinochet was urged by pope John Paul II.<sup>3</sup>
- Demonstrations: courageous demonstrators marched down the streets at great risk, openly publicizing torture, disappearances, and confirmed deaths.
- Singing: People singing, "He's going to fall, he's going to fall" and dancing in the streets so annoyed Pinochet that he banned singing.
- Television programs and advertisements: During the plebiscite, the opposition used their 15-minute daily broadcast to expose torture, "disappearances" and other human rights violations, as well as to show Chileans the breadth of opposition to the regime, thereby empowering people to stand up against it.
- Electoral organizing and nonviolent coalition building: when Pinochet agreed to what Herman and Brodhead have dubbed "demonstration elections" to show popular support for the dictatorship, opposition forces came together in a coalition that cut across ideological and political lines to successfully delegitimize the regime.

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Chilean protestors were very creative in expressing discontent with the Pinochet regime. While under the threat of severe repression, they used a variety of subtle tactics such as:

- A slow-down in which people walked and drove very slowly on a designated day as a sign of protest, an ingenious tactical innovation after a mining strike was called off when the military surrounded the mine and it became clear that a strike would result in bloodshed. The slowdown was impossible for the regime to repress and demonstrated to supporters of the opposition that they were, in fact the majority, empowering them and enabling them to overcome their terror.
- Banging pots and pans outside their homes at 8pm all over the country, especially in Santiago.
- Subtle artistic protest, e.g. Chilean theatre director Hector Noguera reflects that "when we did Hamlet the main thing we underlined was the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius, the king who killed to make himself king" (Epstein and Watson 1990: 86). Women were recruited into the movement through arts workshops (Adams 2000).

### **Ensuing Events:**

Numerous steps taken to move past the military dictatorship have been quite successful, including the conviction of some military officers and the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that aired atrocities. The transition was not without difficulty, however; Pinochet handed over political power but remained in charge of Chile's military until 1998 when he was arrested in London because of an extradition order from Spain (Weeks 2000). Efforts to try him were aborted by his death in December 2006. The Chilean Supreme Court had earlier that year cleared the way for his trial.

Chile's democracy has been preserved, with a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, and a formally free press. In 2005 reform legislation eliminated the military's formal political power, made it possible for the president to remove top military commanders, eliminated unelected seats in the senate, and limited presidential terms. Former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) facilitated a reduction in gender discrimination and urged passage of legislation protecting the rights of the indigenous population.

**Endnotes:**

1. Although the US role in undermining the Allende government is well documented—see the declassified security document at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/ch05-01.htm> (retrieved 22 July 2009)—CIA involvement in the assassination is not despite widespread allegations. Allende had nationalized the American-owned copper mines shortly after his election in 1970 (see Webber 1999:524).
2. Although Pinochet lost a referendum on his rule in 1988, and lost subsequent presidential elections in 1989, a formal transfer of power did not take place until 1990.
3. The pope publically attacked Pinochet as a dictator and called on the church to bring democracy to Chile (Suro 1987).

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