

The Pinochet Regime in Chile  
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Few coups in Latin have received so much international attention as that of Chile in 1973. Condemnation of Pinochet and his regime was almost universal (except for the USA) because his coup took place in a democracy, in a country with a long period of constitutionalism, and because it brought to an end an unusual attempt to create socialism through parliamentary and constitutional means.

Yet Pinochet had his supporters. Indeed a surprisingly large number of Chileans remained loyal to him to the end of his regime. He did after all gain 43% of the vote in a plebiscite to prolong his rule for eight more years after 1988, and if we can discount some of those votes because of fear and intimidation, nonetheless, he had substantial support from business, from right-wing Catholics, from those who feared a return to the chaos of the Allende years, from some sectors of the poor who benefited from the targeted social policies of the regime, and from those who welcomed the tranquillity of the Pinochet years even if it was the tranquillity of a well-ordered prison. (This domestic support, by the way, was far more important than the support of the USA – which in any case did not support him during the Carter presidency or in the later years of the Reagan period).

Supporters will give three reasons for arguing that the legacy of Pinochet was positive and that Chile should be grateful to him. The first is that human rights violations, regrettable as they were, were necessary to combat the evils of Marxism. The second is that he was the architect of an economic miracle. And the third is that he laid the foundations of a stable political order. I think there is little substance to the first and last claim and the second one is far less accurate than often asserted.

The record of human rights violations was appalling – at least three thousand were killed, many thousands tortured and many thousands more were forced into exile. There is never any justification of such brutality by any regime, but the normal excuse offered by military plotters is that a coup is necessary to deal with terrorism and guerrilla violence. But this excuse does not work for Chile. The ease with which the military regime dealt with the very limited and scattered opposition to the coup shows how unprepared the government and its supporters were for effective armed opposition to the plotters on the Right. Even those small groups that had access to arms were in no position to challenge a powerful and effective military. Pinochet and his supporters chose to exercise terror and repression because it served to justify their claim that the Marxist threat was real and could only be countered by such measures. This claim could then be

used to justify in their eyes the creation of a severely authoritarian regime with strict controls over any political activity and drastic punishment for anyone perceived as an opponent of the regime.

The second justification is that he created a model free-market economy. It is certainly true that there was massive privatisation and effective reduction of inflation. But the negative features are huge. The overall growth rate of the seventeen years of his rule was dismal – a little over 2% pa. He engineered two massive recessions- that of 1975 (which could partly be blamed on the situation he inherited), and one of 1982-3 which was due entirely to the regime's economic policies. There was massive social suffering – unemployment at its peak was over 30%, and over 40% of the population were in poverty at the end of his regime. His government reduced social spending with dire consequences for the quality of public health and education. Moreover, in spite of the commitment to neoliberalism, the largest state asset, the massive state copper corporation, CODELCO, was not privatised, and his regime received enormous financial support from a state company nationalised by the Allende regime. I could go on – the much-vaunted pension privatisation is now under attack, the Central Bank only achieved real independence under democracy – and so on. In truth only after the recession of 1982-3 did the regime adopt sensible macro-economic policies.

It must also be stressed that these economic measures were accompanied by corruption which benefited his supporters – and also we know now the man and his family himself. The privatisations were used to reward supporters, and there was little transparency or effective regulation. The rich benefited enormously in his government leaving Chile with the legacy of one of the most unequal income distributions in the world. The claim that Pinochet ruled for the benefit of the country can no longer be sustained. Undeniably Chile has seen great economic progress since 1990 but this, I would argue is the product of the policies of the democratic governments and not the legacy of Pinochet.

What of the claim that Pinochet created a stable and transformed political order? It is true that the Constitution of 1980 that he designed is still in place, but that is against the will of the democratic governments which have lacked the legislative majority to replace it, though there have been fundamental modification to make it less authoritarian and more democratic – the direct election of local authorities, greater powers of Congress, greater Presidential control over military appointments amongst other measures.

Pinochet's regime was characterised by order and stability after 1973 but as virtually all the opposition leaders had been exiled or killed, as all political activity was banned, and as Pinochet's apparatus of repression was extensive and effective that is hardly surprising. The Catholic Church was a lone and courageous voice opposing the human rights violations of the regime. Yet despite the level of repression, when the crisis of 1982-3 increased the suffering of the population, mass protests broke out and continued

to break out monthly for several years. Pinochet never broke the power of the parties even though this was his stated aim, and after his exit from office the same or similar parties and in many cases the same politicians emerged to take office. Undeniably Chile has been a stable and successful democracy since 1990 and that, once more, is to be attributed to the politicians of democracy not the legacy of authoritarianism.

The last question to be raised is one that is common in reaction to the end of his life and his death and is – why was he not brought to justice, why was there no trial? This demands a considered reply.

In the first place, dictators are rarely – if ever – brought to justice unless there is foreign intervention. Secondly, Pinochet was not the only violator of human rights in Chile and progress in this area is impressive. The number of former military officers arrested, on trial or being investigated for human rights abuses is way above those of any other country of Latin America - in 2005, 94 former members of the military were convicted of human rights violations, with an additional 405 cases on trial, and 600 cases are under investigation, representing a total of 1,240 victims. There have been official reports condemning the violations, reparations have been made, trials continue, the attempt to bring Pinochet to justice was never ending, new interpretations challenge the Amnesty Law of 1978, and the Army has admitted culpability and has apologised.

If Pinochet never faced the final humiliation of a trial, he faced many other humiliations. Almost all his supporters deserted him. The Valech Commission on Torture in 2004 produced such undeniable evidence of horrific brutality on such a massive scale than only the hard-line Pinochetistas could ignore it. Cheyre, the commander in chief of the Army, undertook a series of initiatives to express genuine repentance for the abuses that took place under Pinochet. Pinochet's reputation, already fairly low, became even lower with mounting evidence of fraud and illicit enrichment. These developments were unimaginable ten years ago and led to his abandonment by the political right.

There have been demonstrations for and against him following his death, but they are on a small scale. Most Chileans will be glad that a page has been turned and they can concentrate on the issues that most concern governments and its citizens – education, health, employment and security. Democracy is now stable in Chile and Pinochet, like Franco, will increasingly become a figure of interest to historians but less and less relevant to daily political concerns.