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Chile

# The rising waves of mass opposition to the Chilean dictatorship

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

Publication date: Friday 20 September 2013

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**This article was published in *International Viewpoint* No 36, 19 September 1983 for the anniversary of the 1973 coup d'état in Chile. It was signed "Daniel Jebrac", one of the pen names that was frequently used by Daniel Bensaïd in that period.**

Every month since May 11, 1983, the Chilean dictatorship presided over by General Pinochet has had a confrontation with its opponents. There was one on June 14, and again on July 12 and once again on August 11, despite the 18,000 police and military patrolling the capital, Santiago.

On each occasion, these "Days of National Protest" have been marked by choruses of car horns traffic slowdowns, concerted banging of pans, demonstrations and street clashes with the repressive forces.

Through action, through defying all the intimidation, the mass movement has begun to dissipate the pall of fear in the country. It has begun to consolidate itself. It has mobilized again and again, rising more and more indomitably – like the mass movement in Iran that overwhelmed the regime of the shah.

This mounting wave of protests grew out of the days of struggle in December 1982 and March 1983, which were a sort of general rehearsal that served to show the extent of exasperation with the regime.

Underlying this spread of protest are the deep going effects of the economic crisis that exploded at the end of 1981. Unemployment has risen to over 30% of the workforce. The youth have been hit massively. Half of the unemployed have been jobless for more than two years, and 75% for more than 12 months.

Those who do have jobs have seen their buying power cut by at least 20% since 1970. Cereals production has dropped, falling from 1.3 million tons per year to 690,000 tons last year, and the harvest this season will not go over 350,000 tons

The foreign-trade balance is chronically in the red, and the foreign debt is approaching 20 billion dollars, when the population of the country numbers only 11 million. Bankruptcies of small and medium businesses are snowballing.

The attempts to apply partial economic solutions have finally given way to forms of drastic intervention into the economy. The debt owed by Chilean concerns has been centralized in the hands of the state. The International Monetary Fund and the private international banks have tightened the vice of their conditions.

Under this constraint, the economic indexes for the first half of 1983 have been marked by a relative stabilization. Reduction of imports has made it possible to improve the balance of trade. There has been a slight decline in the unemployment rate, although in this respect the aid plans have changed the method of keeping the statistics more than the social reality. And the renewal of inventories has brought about a slight upturn in some industries.

However, overall, these pressures have kept economic activity at a very low level. This has made it impossible to meet the essential demands of the IMF. But it has deepened still more the tensions between the government and major factions of the bourgeoisie.

At the end of its second inspection trip, the IMF had to recognize that the targets had not been achieved. In the

month of January alone, the government spent the credits that had been allotted for the entire year, 600 million dollars, to support private banking.

All these social and economic factors, therefore, explain the isolation and weakening of the military regime.

## A variegated opposition

The days of protest that began with the one on May 11 are the result of the convergence of opposition to the regime from various quarters. The following are the major components:

- The bosses organizations such as the Producers and Traders Confederation and the Sociedad de Fomento Fabril (the industrialists' association), which have condemned the deal with the IMF without proposing an alternative.
- The bourgeois opposition parties of the centre and the right, such as the Christian Democrats, who have been driven to action by Pinochet's intransigence and the restiveness of their own supporters. This section of the opposition seeks fundamentally to create a climate of civil disobedience in order to get the military to share the government with civilians and accept a gradual transition to "a state with limited constitutional rights."
- The small and middle businessmen that have been hard hit by the crisis, and which are heavily in debt. This includes the truckers and merchants, whose role is important at this stage in the protest.
- The trade-union movement, which has more and more combined its economic demands with democratic ones. After being crushed in the wake of the September 1973 coup d'etat, it has undergone a process of recomposition in recent years. But it remains very much divided on trade lines. The copper miners played an important role in the spring 1983 mobilizations.

The absence of an organized leadership of all these heterogeneous forces has limited their effectiveness. Nonetheless, the government initially under-estimated their capacity to organize and effectively coordinate the days of protest.

Another weakness of this protest movement lies in the still weak structures of the trade-union movement at the rank-and-file level. While the trade-union leaderships have participated in the calls for mobilizations, their links with the real process of reorganising the trade-union and mass movements remain tenuous. The June 27 general strike confirmed this once again.

The truckers went out massively. But the workers in the factories were often badly informed and became isolated after the arrest of some union leaders. So, facing the threat of repression, the factories did not join in the strike.

On the left some have seen this ill-timed initiative as a manoeuvre by the moderate sectors to inflict a defeat on a poorly prepared workers movement and to create more favourable conditions for dialogue with the dictatorship.

Regardless of what may have lain behind this decision, the acknowledged semi-failure of the strike did not keep the July day of protest, called two weeks later, from being a success. Nor did it keep this day of protest from taking a more political form in response to the preventive arrest of the Christian Democratic leader Gabriel Valdes.

The bourgeois opposition as well as the church authorities, who have occupied the centre stage, have rushed to "distinguish legitimate peaceful protest from vandalism and violence." They are, of course, anxious to find a solution to the situation before the mass movement revives, as well as being sensitive to the pressures of the international suppliers of funds.

By making such statements, these bourgeois forces put the blame directly on the left, more specifically the Communist Party and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), for the barrages of stones and the barricades made from tyres, for the first forms of self-defence in the shantytowns.

To a large extent, however, this elementary violence was the spontaneous expression of mass exasperation at poverty and unemployment. There is, thus, no need to look for any shadowy instigators.

Nonetheless, the bourgeois opposition wanted to make the question of violence the dividing line between the "responsible opposition and the "subversive" left.

Parallel to this, following June 14, 1983, the big capitalists have also changed their attitude and accepted the deal with the IMF as an unavoidable evil. They have defined themselves simply as "the economic opposition" to the government, nothing more.

For its part, the government made some economic concessions to certain sectors. For example, it agreed to a debt moratorium and renegotiation of debt for the truckers. It provided for easements of real-estate debt. And it agreed to the rehiring of some of the 2,000 copper miners that it ordered fired in June when it moved to crush the strike.

But the repressive vice of the dictatorship has not been relaxed. At the end of June, the curfew was extended and street patrols were reinforced. At the time of the June 27 strike, censorship was imposed on the press. In the first half of 1983, more than 3,000 persons were arrested, as against 500 respectively in the first half of 1981 and 1982.

Almost all those arrested were taken in "group arrests," that is, during demonstrations or mobilizations. Along with this, the selective repression against the vanguard has continued, in particular against the MIR, which was hard hit in March.

## The bourgeois solutions

By the beginning of August, the political schemes of the different forces emerged more clearly. First, Pinochet confirmed the timing set by the 1980 constitutional referendum - the non-Marxist parties would be legalized, of course, but in 1989!

At the same time, a civilian, Onofre Jarpa, former chairperson of the far right National Party, was named to head the Ministry of the Interior and Police.

Jarpas' appointment was supposed to facilitate dialogue with the civilian opposition, with the perspective simply of adjusting the calendar set by Pinochet. That is, a parliament would be elected in 1986, with a modification of the rules about parties based on a referendum to amend the constitution.

The Democratic Alliance, a coalition comprising the Christian Democrats, the main bourgeois opposition forces, and

the Socialist Party, responded immediately by calling for the resignation of Pinochet, the formation of a civilian-military government to preside over an 18-month period of transition, and the calling during this period of an assembly to draw up a new constitution.

The viability of such a formula depends to a large extent on the ability of the bourgeois opposition to win the confidence of sections of the military, to break them away from General Pinochet, and secure their collaboration. This solution has been viewed favourably in the U.S. press. And in such an operation General Leigh, one of the leaders of the 1973 coup who resigned from the junta in 1978, could serve as the bridge between civilians and military.

A weak point in the bourgeois alternative is the fragmentation of the Socialist Party into several public factions. In order to make possible dialogue with the military, it is important to exclude the Communist Party and the MIR from the opposition coalition under the pretext of excluding forces that advocate armed struggle. But it is just as important to include a strong enough SP to serve as a bridge to the reviving mass movement. This is the precondition for a new line-up of political forces to prevent any immediate repetition of the polarization of the 1960s between the Christian Democrats and the other bourgeois parties on one side, and the former components of the Unidad Popular Coalition (the CP, SP, and the left Christians) on the other.

In fact, while it has officially come out in support of armed struggle, the CP seems hardly to have gone beyond symbolic actions. It has devoted the bulk of its forces to rebuilding roots in the mass movement, which is in the process of re-composition.

Although it is continuing to knock on the door of the Democratic Alliance and court the Christian Democrats, the CP is concerned about establishing a relationship of forces. And so, it has formed a regroupment with SP currents, the MIR, and the United Peoples Action Movement (MAPU), the main left Christian group.

Coming in this context of big political manoeuvres, following in fact only a few days after the appointment of Onofre Jarpa, the August 11 day of protest was the bloodiest since May. Some military units got orders to "shoot for the belly," and extremely brutal searches were carried out in the poor neighbourhoods. The result was that several dozen demonstrators were killed.

## Promises of liberalization and repression

The regime wants at the same time to make a new demonstration of force and regain a social base, the lack of which has been becoming more and more serious.

Thus the bloodbath was followed immediately by new promises from Pinochet (public works, reforestation, the creation of 80,000 jobs). It was announced that beginning in September protests would be tolerated on the condition that the organizers assure order and discipline. This was a concession but at the same time a challenge to the bourgeois opposition to demonstrate its capacity to keep a rein on the more radicalized sections of the masses in mobilizations against the dictatorship.

This deceptive 'liberalization' is thus designed to foster divisions in the opposition and to build up pretexts for a 'unity manoeuvre' by the army that embarked on a crusade against 'chaos' ten years ago by staging a military coup d'etat against the Allende government.

The only way to avoid these traps is to reinforce the unity and breadth of the mass mobilizations around the objective

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of throwing out Pinochet, who today is the kingpin of the dictatorship and the primary obstacle to restoring democratic rights. Only reorganization of the workers movement on the basis of unity and in-dependence from all the bourgeois political apparatuses can provide a solid leadership and backbone for the movement to overthrow the tyrant.

Ten years of dictatorship, destitution and murder is more than enough.