

4-17-1998

Rift Develops in Chile's Governing Party Over Failure to Censure Pinochet

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Rift Develops in Chile's Governing Party Over Failure to Censure Pinochet." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12492>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Rift Develops in Chile's Governing Party Over Failure to Censure Pinochet

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 1998-04-17

Chile's Chamber of Deputies voted down a motion to censure former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) and remove him from his lifetime Senate seat. Far from resolving the controversy surrounding Pinochet, the vote has seriously strained the unity of the governing Concertacion coalition. After an 11-hour marathon session on April 9, the lower house voted 62-52 to reject the motion that would have censured the retired army commander in chief for "dishonoring" the country (see NotiSur, 03/20/98). "It was a day of political failure for the coalition," said Sen. Sergio Bitar, president of the Partido por la Democracia (PPD). "We are at a very weak moment." Even if the motion had been passed in the lower house, it was doomed to eventual failure since Pinochet supporters have a comfortable majority in the Senate.

Nevertheless, a vote for censure would have shown a degree of political sanction for Pinochet, whose regime was responsible for the disappearance and death of more than 3,000 Chileans. President Frei opposes censure. Several factors contributed to the negative vote, including the opposition of President Frei, who called the measure "inconvenient." Former president Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), a longtime leader of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), supported Frei's position, as did Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza. That encouraged other PDC deputies to vote against the proposal.

The right argued that if Pinochet was guilty of the charges, it would implicate Aylwin and Frei for allowing the illegal action by the then commander of the army. The pro-Pinochet lawmakers won approval for a secret ballot, which was also key in defeating the motion. When the vote was taken, 12 PDC deputies, including party president Enrique Krauss, joined Pinochet's supporters in opposing the measure, providing the critical votes needed to block censure. Angry members of the Juventud PDC occupied party headquarters for four days following the vote, calling for an internal party review and the resignation of the party leadership.

Division in Concertacion a boon to right wing

For the political right, divisions in the Concertacion have improved its chance to take power in the 2000 elections. Andres Chadwick, vice president of the ultra-right Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI), said the measure against Pinochet was an "enormous blunder" by the Concertacion that significantly changed the political landscape. "I am convinced that the Concertacion has very little life left," Chadwick said. "With this new scenario and the failure of the Concertacion leaders to resolve the real problems of the people and, even worse, their inability to resolve the political problems they have created, a definite possibility exists for us to be the government in 2000."

Although many coalition leaders acknowledged the seriousness of the situation, they denied the difficulties spell the end of the alliance. PPD president Sergio Bitar, who called the crisis "a political defeat," said the coalition must learn that with unity things can be accomplished, but division only

leads to defeat. Divisions could affect Concertacion candidate Genaro Arriagada, PDC member and formerly President Frei's top aide, said the Concertacion and the PDC are passing through their worst moments. He said the move in the legislature has divided the alliance and strengthened Pinochet, as he predicted in January, and he said it would take a "gesture of greatness" to get the alliance out of its crisis. The moment of truth will come when the Concertacion has to choose its presidential candidate for the December 1999 elections. The PDC wants that candidate to once again come from its ranks.

One PDC hopeful is Senate president Andres Zaldivar, who opposes censuring Pinochet. To the extent that the controversy regarding Pinochet continues to be an issue, Zaldivar's ambitions could be jeopardized. In a poll taken days before the Chamber of Deputies vote by the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporanea (CERC), 61% of respondents opposed Pinochet's lifetime seat in the Senate, and 50% supported the censure motion, while 30% opposed the measure. Both the Partido Socialista (PS) and the PPD support the candidacy of PS member Ricardo Lagos. Lagos, a lawyer, economist, and university professor, is the popular leader of the "progressive wing" of the Concertacion and leads all presidential-preference polls at this point.

The PS and PPD argue that, after two PDC presidents, one of their members should head the Concertacion ticket. The Concertacion has yet to define the mechanism to select its candidate, but the PDC has so far refused to support Lagos. Frei calls for Concertacion unity. On April 14, Frei called for unity within the governing alliance. Besides listing the coalition's achievements during the transition process begun in 1990, Frei also referred to tasks still unfinished and said they need, "above all, the unity of the Concertacion." "Political parties are tested when times are difficult," Frei said, adding that the Concertacion parties should turn their attention to the government's social agenda, announced two weeks ago, rather than continue debilitating infighting regarding Pinochet.

Frei added he fully supports PDC president Krauss, who was severely criticized for his handling of the censure motion. Despite Frei's remarks, Gabriel Ascensio and Andres Palma, two of the five PDC deputies who brought the charges against Pinochet, are calling for the ouster of Krauss as party president. A PDC National Council meeting in late April could see a showdown between those who supported censure and those who opposed it. [Sources: Clarin (Argentina), Reuter, 04/10/98; The Miami Herald, 04/11/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/11/98, 04/12/98; Associated Press, 04/13/98; Notimex, 04/10/98, 04/11/98, 04/14/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/11/98, 04/14/98; CHIP News (Chile), 04/13/98, 04/14/98]

-- End --