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Chile Chooses Force Over Reason in Easter Island Clampdown

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Chilean authorities last week lived up to their nation’s motto—"por la razón o la fuerza" (by reason or force)—opting for the latter to end what had been a six-month standoff with indigenous activists on Easter Island. Known locally as Rapa Nui, the isolated Pacific island lies more than 3,000 km west of Chile, which controls it as a "special territory."

Early on Feb. 6, some 50 heavily armed carabineros, Chile’s uniformed police, burst into a luxury hotel in the Rapa Nui city of Hanga Roa to forcibly evict a group of indigenous squatters. The squatters, all members of the Hito tribal clan, had occupied the hotel since last August. The family claims ancestral ownership of the land on which the US$800 per night Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa lies.

The official owners of the property, the Scheiss family, acquired the land from the Chilean government in the 1990s. Prior to the occupation by Hito family activists, Jeanette Scheiss had invested heavily in upgrading the facility. Jeanette is married to Christoph Schiess, CEO of the powerful Chilean holding company Empresas Transoceánica. The Schiess family claims the Hito squatters have cost them US$6 million in lost tourism revenue. Tourism is the principal industry on Rapa Nui, a UNESCO World Heritage Site best known for its mysterious moai statues.

"After six months, we’re only now seeing the re-establishment of the rule of law," Jeanette Scheiss told the Chilean daily.

The Hito family couldn’t disagree more, calling the raid "illegal." The Rapa Nui clan insists its ancestors were cheated out of the land decades ago by the Chilean government, which had no right to later sell it to a third party. The indigenous group also alleges that the Chilean administration of President Sebastián Piñera, a former billionaire businessman, has close personal ties with the Scheiss family. Witnesses to the Feb. 6 raid claim two vanloads of carabineros arrived in Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa shuttle busses.

"Through the actions that took place, today’s illegal eviction, the government of President Sebastián Piñera and his Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter have tried to confirm the most important unwritten rule in Chile: economic power trumps the laws, the people, and the common good," family spokesperson Marisol Hito told reporters.

Piñera and Hinzpeter would no doubt argue otherwise. But they would be hard-pressed to deny that the battle regarding the Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa involves much more than a simple family feud. In occupying the property last August, the Hito clan raised questions not just about ownership of a single plot of land but about Chile’s colonial relationship with Rapa Nui as a whole.

"This conflict involves problems that are much more complex and serious than the simple occupation of disputed lands and buildings," Partido Socialista (PS) Sen. Juan Pablo Letelier told
reporters in December. "This is about a group of islanders protesting abuses involving the Chilean state’s usurpation of land from its original owners."

**Snuffing out resistance**

When Chile annexed Rapa Nui in 1888, the island’s native population was close to extinction. Environmental problems, compounded by Rapa Nui’s isolation, had drastically reduced the population even before the first contact with Europeans. Disease and later slave raids (organized from Peru in the early 1860s) brought even more devastation. By 1877 the population is believed to have dropped to just 111.

Upon taking control of island, Chile leased most of Rapa Nui to a British sheep-farming company—until 1953. During that time the island’s small indigenous population was restricted to just a single settlement: Hanga Roa. The Chilean Navy managed the island for the next dozen years, finally opening it to the public in 1966. Only then were native islanders granted Chilean citizenship.

Rapa Nui’s overall population now stands at roughly 4,000, 60% of whom consider themselves native islanders. Not surprisingly, relations between indigenous Rapa Nui and Chilean mainlanders are at times strained. As the case of the Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa illustrates, property issues are a major bone of contention. The office of Bienes Nacionales says native islanders, despite being in the majority, own just 13.6% of Easter Island’s territory.

Immigration is a major issue as well (islanders want to restrict settlement by mainlanders) as is the growing tourism industry, of which islanders would like a greater share of profits. Underlying all of those concerns is the question of whether Rapa Nui can or should be autonomous. A 2007 constitutional reform was supposed to allow for partial administrative autonomy. With the legislation still bogged down in Congress, however, Rapa Nui continues to be administered from Chile’s Valparaíso Region.

Tired of waiting for answers from across the ocean, the Hito and several other Rapa Nui clans began last August to take action, occupying more than a dozen contested properties in Hanga Roa, the Scheiss family’s hotel included. Chilean authorities reacted by setting up several roundtable-discussion groups that were supposed to offer recommendations on the various issues involved—land, immigration, development, and administration—within two months.

But while promising to resolve the impasse through reason, the Chilean government simultaneously opted to boost the island’s police force, sending several planeloads of carabineros out across the Pacific. The carabineros, technically a branch of Chile’s armed forces, went into action Sept. 7. In a joint operation with Investigaciones (the national detective force), police burst into the Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa, temporarily forcing squatters out and making several arrests.

"The procedure was carried out with extreme violence and in the presence of families and children who were there. That in turn generated a series of later incidents in front of the Easter Island courthouse," Observatorio Ciudadano, a Chilean indigenous rights group, explained in a recent communiqué.

Other brutal raids followed. The most violent took place Dec. 3, when police and islanders clashed in a bloody brawl in the center of Hanga Roa. Police fired pellets at the protestors, in some cases at point-blank range, injuring dozens. Carabineros claimed they, too, sustained serious injuries. Police
justified their harsh tactics by saying some protestors were armed with Molotov cocktails. Witnesses dismissed those claims.

President Piñera, Chile’s first conservative leader since dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), defended the police clampdown on Rapa Nui, saying the government is committed to resolving the matter peacefully but is obliged to maintain public order and the rule of law. Piñera, a former senator from the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN), took office last March (NotiSur, March 12, 2010).

Interior Minister Hinzpeter offered a similar response. He told reporters Dec. 6 that "dialogue is always the most important" option. Hinzpeter went on to explain, however, that when public prosecutors order evictions, carabineros will carry out those orders "with the backing of the government."

"Rapa Nui isn’t Africa"

For a growing number of critics, however, the Piñera government’s promises of dialogue and peaceful resolution ring increasingly hollow with each successive police crackdown.

"Minister Hinzpeter needs to understand that Rapa Nui isn’t Iraq or Afghanistan," Sen. Alejandro Navarro told reporters following the Dec. 3 melee. "There are no guerillas, just people who were cheated by the state, who lost their lands less than 80 years ago, and who for legitimate reasons want them back." Navarro, a former member of the PS, now leads the far-left fringe party Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS).

Joining him in denouncing the police raids was former independent presidential candidate Marco Enríquez-Ominami, who opposes the "militarization and repression" of Rapa Nui. Sen. Letelier has also been outspoken in his criticisms. Following the Dec. 3 episode, the PS senator accused carabineros of being dishonest about their role in the violence.

"Official hospital records show exactly who was admitted with injuries following the violent eviction," Letelier told reporters Dec. 6. "The hospital list shows that there weren’t 16 or 17 injured carabineros [as the police claim], but rather just one, versus 17 Rapa Nui who received treatment. Others no doubt didn’t go to the hospital because they didn’t feel safe."

"[The police] openly lied saying there were Molotov cocktails and spears," Letelier added. "This shows tremendous ignorance. Rapa Nui isn’t Africa. Rapa Nui islanders don’t use spears. There were no Molotov cocktails."

The repeated incidents of police violence have attracted critics from abroad as well. Last month UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples James Anaya sent a letter to Piñera criticising police actions and calling on the Chilean government to return to the negotiating table.

US Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-HI) and Eni Faleomavaega, a nonvoting US representative from American Samoa, offered an even-more-recent rebuke. On Feb. 4, the two sent their own letter to the Chilean president, urging him to "refrain from the use of disproportionate force in dealing with peaceful Rapa Nui protesters occupying their ancestral land on the entire island."

As evidenced by last week’s hotel raid—carried out just two days after Akaka and Faleomavaega mailed their missive—Piñera does not appear overly concerned at this point with how the Rapa Nui
issue is being interpreted overseas. Whether he likes it not, however, he will have to contend with how his government’s handling of the matter plays out on the island itself.

In successfully clearing out the last of the Hangaroa Eco Village & Spa squatters, Chilean authorities can claim a victory of sorts. The land row now heads to the courts, where it can be dealt with tidily within the confines of the legal system. It is unlikely, however, that the courts alone will be able to diffuse historical tensions, which the last few months of police repression have only exacerbated. To bring real improvement to its tenuous colonial relationship with the people of Rapa Nui, the Chilean government—sooner or later—will have to begin privileging reason over force. That, or risk losing Rapa Nui altogether.

"The island has another option: to ask for independence, as it had in the past," local Rapa Nui leader Mario Tuki told the Chilean daily in December. "The island’s goal hasn’t been to regain its independence, but with this pressure that we’re facing today, we’re thinking about it."

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