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After 40 Years, Chile Still Split Over 1973 Military Coup

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If this month’s flurry of finger-pointing, public apologies, media exposés, and commemoration ceremonies was any indication, Chile’s 1973 military coup—and the brutal dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) that it unleashed—are nowhere close to fading from the country’s collective conscience.

Sept. 11 marked the 40th anniversary of the bloody coup, a singular historic event that continues to divide the South American nation even now, 23 years after democracy was restored and seven years after the dictator, Pinochet, passed away (NotiSur, Jan. 5, 2007). Critics of the military strongman lament that he was never made to answer for the multitude of human rights violations committed during his 17-year hold on power. Military and secret police arrested and tortured tens of thousands for their leftist leanings. More than 3,000 were killed or disappeared, according to government reports. But Pinochet also has his defenders. Some claim he saved the country from imminent civil war. Many more applaud his economic legacy: the World Bank now ranks Chile as the region’s richest in per capita Gross National Income (GNI).

Always a day charged with raw emotions, this year’s anniversary—taking place against the backdrop of a quickly approaching presidential election—touched a particular nerve in Chile, where opinions about Pinochet’s legacy still serve as an all-important litmus test for the country’s political leaders. A case in point: Chile’s two principal power blocs, the conservative Alianza and center-left Concertación coalitions, both commemorated the coup anniversary, but in separate ceremonies—held on the same morning, Sept. 9, on opposite sides of Santiago’s city center.

In a delicately worded address, President Sebastián Piñera condemned the Pinochet regime for its many human rights violations. "Things like torture and forced disappearances should never ever be justified," he told onlookers gathered in front of La Moneda, Chile’s presidential palace. "In other words, the ends don’t justify the means."

The president was careful, nevertheless, to avoid the word "dictatorship." He also pegged deposed President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) as partly responsible for the coup. Piñera accused Allende’s Unidad Popular government of setting in motion "a predictable sequence of events" by "repeatedly violating the rule of law."

Allende, a leftist who narrowly won the presidency in 1970 after several failed bids, died during the military’s 1973 assault on La Moneda. Many on the Chilean left hail him as a martyr. The far-right has long accused Allende of pushing Chile toward a Cuba-style Marxist state. Although the exact circumstances of his death remain a mystery, most observers believe Allende committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. "I will not resign," Allende, in his final speech, told radio listeners on the morning of the coup. "Placed in a historic transition, I will pay for loyalty to the people with my life."

Election front-runner and former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2009) chose not to attend the government’s official commemoration, opting instead to lead a parallel event at the Museo de la...
Memoria y de los Derechos Humanos de Chile, less than 3 km away. Speaking to a crowd that included her three presidential predecessors, Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) and Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), Bachelet paid homage to the Pinochet era’s many victims. "Here, commemorating with us, hugging as, are all [of the people] we remember, all of those we love, who’ve never left us and never will."

Unlike Piñera, Bachelet showed no qualms about using the word "dictatorship" to describe Pinochet’s civilian-military government. "It’s important that we establish some clarity about what exactly took place," she said. "That means recognizing the radical difference between democracy and dictatorship."

The former president also challenged claims by the political right that the coup was an "inevitable" result of political polarization during Allende’s presidency. "It’s all right to talk about the deepening of the social conflict, the absence of dialogue, the intolerance and polarization in all the political sectors," she said. "But it’s not all right to say [Chile] was facing the start of a civil war, because to further democracy, to support it, what’s required is more democracy, not a coup d’état."

An historical dividing line

Piñera, a billionaire businessman who is now in the final months of his presidency, is Chile’s first conservative leader since Pinochet. For two decades before his 2010 election, the presidency was controlled by the Concertación, which has recently rechristened itself the Nueva Mayoría. Piñera claims he sided with Pinochet’s opponents by voting "no" in an all important 1988 referendum that precipitated Chile’s return to democracy. Many leading figures in his coalition, however, were active supporters of the dictatorship. Some, including former Piñera Cabinet members Joaquín Lavín and Pablo Longueira of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), cut their political teeth working directly for the Pinochet regime.

Many of the Concertación’s veterans, in contrast, were victims of the dictatorship. Bachelet, the opposition coalition’s de facto leader, went into exile in 1975 after being arrested and tortured by Pinochet agents. Her father, an Air Force general and Allende loyalist, died a year earlier as a result of the abuse he endured when he, too, was held captive.

Bachelet is one of nine candidates set to participate in Chile’s Nov. 17 presidential election. A runoff, should it be necessary, will take place on Dec. 15. Polls have the former president well ahead of her closest rival, Evelyn Matthei (UDI), who served as Piñera’s labor minister before entering the race as a last-minute replacement for then candidate Longueira (NotiSur, Aug. 9, 2013). Longueira won the Alianza’s intracoalition primary vote in late June (NotiSur, July 12, 2013) but dropped his candidacy a month later, citing depression. Other contenders include former deputy Marco Enríquez-Ominami of the Partido Progresista (PRO), who finished third in the last presidential election (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009); leftwing economist Marcel Claude; and Franco Parisi, a television commentator and political independent.

Like Bachelet, Matthei is the daughter of a former Air Force general. The two candidates have known each other since the late 1950s, when their families were neighbors on the Cerro Moreno Air Force Base, near the northern city of Antofagasta. In 1974, Matthei’s father, Fernando Matthei Aubel, was assigned command of the detention and torture center in which Bachelet’s father, Gen. Alberto Bachelet, was being held. Gen. Bachelet died six weeks later.
Digging up the past

The two coalitions’ competing coup commemorations capped several weeks of media-driven buildup that began in earnest with an episode involving one of the principal protagonists from the last major Sept. 11 anniversary.

In 2003, as Chile prepared to mark the 30th anniversary of the coup, the Army’s then top commander, Gen. Juan Emilio Cheyre, grabbed headlines with a speech in which he expressed sympathy for "the victims of the traumatic process Chile went through, for the detained and disappeared." A mea culpa of sorts, Cheyre’s words broke a long tradition of military silence on the issue of Pinochet-era human rights violations. The general went further still in a 2004 report, saying the Army "took the difficult but irreversible decision to assume responsibility as an institution for all its punishable and morally unacceptable past deeds" (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2004).

A decade later, Cheyre found himself back in the news, this time for his role in the heartbreaking story of a middle-aged Argentine man, Ernesto Lejderman, whose parents were hunted down and killed by Chilean soldiers following the 1973 coup. Lejderman, aged two at the time, survived the attack. Soldiers took him to a nearby military base. From there, Cheyre, then a young lieutenant, delivered the orphaned toddler to a convent. Lejderman was later returned to his paternal grandparents in Argentina.

The Chilean public was reminded of Lejderman’s story in late August, when the now 42-year-old appeared, together with retired Gen. Cheyre, on a news program produced by TVN, Chile’s national television network. "Why all these years of silence?" Lejderman asked Cheyre. "Chilean society as a whole is asking for an answer. Not just me." Cheyre responded by saying he had been lied to by his military superiors, who claimed Lejderman’s parents had killed themselves. "If I’d know anything more about Ernesto’s case I would have said something," he said. The next day, Cheyre resigned from his post as president of the Consejo del Servicio Electoral, the country’s electoral board.

Playing the blame game

The dramatic face-to-face coincided with several other television specials focused on issues related to the coup and dictatorship. One of TVN’s rival stations, Chilevisión, aired a documentary miniseries, Chile, las imagines prohibidas, hosted by one of the country’s leading actors and featuring never-before-seen stills and film clips. The show proved to be both controversial and extremely popular, beating out Canal 13’s Soltera Otra Vez 2, a racy soap that normally dominates the time slot. Canal 13 went on to broadcast its own historical programs: Los 1,000 días, about Allende’s final days in office; and 11 íntimo, a miniseries focusing on the military putsch.

Weeks of coup-related coverage prompted something of a national soul-searching, which—perhaps inevitably—also produced a fair amount of finger-pointing. Interestingly, much of the criticism focused not on the military but on its civilian accomplices. Influential newspaper columnist and Universidad Diego Portales rector Carlos Peña took the opportunity to single out UDI founder Jaime Guzmán as one of the figures most responsible for helping Pinochet’s dictatorship succeed and endure. Guzmán, a conservative ideologue who played a key role in laying out Chile’s Constitution, was assassinated in 1991 by left-wing militants.

Others blamed the media, chiding newspapers like El Mercurio for keeping the Chilean public in the dark about the dictatorship’s human rights violations and other misdeeds. President Piñera
joined the blame game as well, pointing his finger at the judiciary. The courts were not "a la altura" (up to the task) when it came to protecting ordinary citizens from state repression, he said.

The Asociación de Magistrados took the president’s comments to heart. On Sept. 4, the organization offered a dramatic apology. "The time has come to seek forgiveness from the victims, their family members, and Chilean society as a whole," the judges’ statement read. "The judiciary could and should have done much more, precisely because it was the only institution in the country that wasn’t being controlled by [Pinochet’s] de facto government."

The mea cupla came on the heels of another attention-grabbing admission—by veteran UDI Sen. Hernán Larraín—who publicly apologized "for not collaborating enough on reconciliation." Even after 40 years, however, not everyone is willing to extend such generous gestures. When asked if she would follow Larraín’s lead, the Alianza’s presidential candidate, Evelyn Matthei, sharply dismissed the notion. "I was 20 years old at the time. I have nothing to apologize for."

Many on the left say that such apologies, even when they are forthcoming, are too little, too late. "One sector in our society attacked the other sector in a savage and brutal way, and those wounds don’t heal easily," National History Award winner Gabriel Salazar said in a recent interview with Radio ADN. "The end product of all those human rights violations is the neoliberal [economic] model: the state, market, and education system that we now have—all of that is still intact."

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