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Chile's dictator, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, is determined to continue his 14-year mandate as president in a single-candidate election next year. As the country approaches a political crossroad, moderates on the left are urging Washington to place more pressure on the government, while those on the right are warning that the more confrontational Washington becomes, the stronger Pinochet gets. Among the factors complicating the Chilean case have been the absence of a united democratic opposition and Pinochet's ability to exploit the opposition's divisions and cultivating the nationalism and professional loyalty of the military.

In statements last week during a visit in Santiago, Robert Gelbard, deputy assistant secretary of state for South American affairs, put the United States on record as preferring competitive presidential elections in Chile, but he also backed a planned single-candidate plebiscite provided the vote is held with safeguards against fraud. A sizable part of Chile's democratic opposition wants the United States to go further and apply economic sanctions. At a minimum, the opposition wants Washington to support the kind of social mobilization and mass demonstrations that undermined Jean Claude Duvalier in Haiti and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines last year and forced a democratic opening in South Korea this year.

Several bills recently introduced in the US Congress reflect growing concern on Capitol Hill about Pinochet's intentions and the Reagan administration's measured policy. US officials still hope that some coalition of center-right opposition groups can entice the armed forces into an agreement on a mutually acceptable civilian candidate for the plebiscite. Responsibility for picking the nominee rests with the commanders of the armed forces and police. Pinochet, who is openly campaigning to be the candidate, announced last week the plebiscite would be held in "about a year," earlier than the March 1989 constitutional deadline. The US strategy includes courting the military to break ranks with Pinochet.

To this end, the Reagan administration has declined to vote against international loans to Chile. Sanctions, officials say, would antagonize conservative forces in the US and arouse nationalist resentment that could serve Pinochet. "A certain ambiguity continues to exist in the US approach," said Heraldo Munoz, a Socialist Party leader who recently completed a book on US-Chilean relations. "On the one hand, the United States has become quite critical of the situation in Chile. On the other hand, there are signs of support for the regime, as in the relatively large amounts of assistance that continue to come from international financial institutions to which America belongs. "These contradictions," he went on, "reflect the limits under which American policy must operate.

The Reagan administration cannot get too close to a Chilean regime that violates human rights and resists moving towards democracy. Yet it also cannot afford falling too far into confrontation with a military government whose anticomunism and pro-free enterprise policies coincide with those...
in Washington." Nonetheless, Munoz and others fault the United States not only for sending mixed signals but also for seeming to focus just on removing Pinochet rather than on the larger issue of constitutional reform. Even if Pinochet is jettisoned, they say, the Constitution approved in 1980 in a plebiscite termed unfair by the State Department gives the military long-term indirect control, deprives congressional representatives of real power and excludes marxist parties from the electoral process.

The Reagan administration has endorsed calls for changes in the Constitution. But Washington's room to maneuver has been stunted by the inability of Chile's splintered democratic opposition to unite around this theme or much else. There is still a chance Pinochet may pull himself out of the running. One commonly discussed scenario is that if he fears defeat in the plebiscite, Pinochet may ask to handpick the plebiscite candidate and keep his title as head of the armed forces.

Alternately, he could opt for free elections, figuring he stands a better chance of winning against a divided field of opposition candidates than in a yes-or-no plebiscite. What worries US officials is that an extension of Pinochet's presidency could trigger greater political polarization, violence and chaos. The Reagan administration began distancing itself from Pinochet after the Chilean leader cracked down on opposition protests in 1983.

The arrival in Santiago of US Ambassador Harry Barnes in November 1985 personified Washington's decision to intensify criticism of Chile's human rights record and to promote more actively a transition to democracy. Since then, Barnes, a widely respected career diplomat has overseen a broadening of embassy contacts with opposition parties and human rights groups. The US shift has irritated Pinochet. The general refused last week to see Gelbard and avoided a ceremony on Easter Island attended by the US official to inaugurate the lengthening of a runway for use as a US space shuttle emergency landing site. At the last minute, the Chilean leader also yanked his labor minister away from a scheduled meeting with Gelbard. (Basic data from WASHINGTON POST, O8/25/87) *

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