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Chile: Pinochet Willing To Consider Selected Constitutional Reforms

by John Neagle

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In a speech on March 11 in Santiago, Gen. Augusto Pinochet said he is willing to consider some constitutional changes sought by the opposition. Pinochet said that he had instructed Interior Minister Carlos Caceres to study several constitutional changes, such as suggestions that would modify an article banning Marxism, reduce the planned eight-year presidential term and eliminate the president's emergency power to send citizens into exile, and dissolve the House of Deputies. Opponents have said the changes are needed to ensure democracy when an elected government takes office. Under the existing constitution, the amendments would have to be approved in a national referendum. Pinochet said that "the only intention the government has in indicating its willingness to modify the constitution is to perfect it. "Our aim is far from the intentions of those who want to dismantle our institutional structure or those who think that the president who leads the country is acting with some hidden personal aim," he added. Pinochet spoke at a ceremony marking the eighth anniversary of the constitution. If the referendum supports the government's proposed changes, the reforms would take place before the December elections. After the speech Pinochet told a group of supporters outside the government building that they should unite behind a candidate who would continue his policies. According to AP, several opposition leaders said Pinochet might consider some constitutional reforms in exchange for an amendment that would permit him to be a presidential candidate in the December elections. Patricio Aylwin, Christian Democrat party leader, and the opposition's most likely presidential candidate, said Pinochet's statements were "positive," but insufficient. Members of the United Left, a coalition of leftist parties which includes the proscribed Communist Party, asserted that Pinochet had not mentioned the most important constitutional reforms supported by the opposition. They suggested that in any future referendum, Chileans should have a choice between reforms suggested by the government, and others presented by the opposition. Small groups of anti-government demonstrators battled with Pinochet supporters in the downtown streets after the president's speech. Police used water cannons to stop the fighting. Two persons were wounded, and about a dozen arrested. (Basic data from Xinhua, AP, 03/11/89)

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