

Explaining the 2019 Social Rebellion in Chile

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The roots of the current social explosion in Chile can be found in the 17-year dictatorship headed by General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), who took power after a bloody military coup backed by Washington. The armed forces overthrew the democratic socialist government of Salvador Allende and imposed brutal repression and wrenching neoliberal restructuring. Pinochet and the so-called Chicago Boys privatized pensions, healthcare, education, even the water. The state used violence and terror to subdue and traumatize society, and there was a total absence of justice.

The transition in 1990 to civilian government raised many expectations. The governments of the Concertación (an alliance of center and center-left political forces)—led by presidents Patricio Aylwin, Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, Ricardo Lagos, and Michelle Bachelet— instituted social measures to reduce poverty. But the neoliberal system was left in place. One reason was precisely the limits enshrined in the dictatorship’s 1980 Constitution and subsequent decrees, designed to solidify right-wing, pro-market dominance and prevent democratic change. This 1980 constitution, written by a commission of hand-picked dictatorship functionaries, was designed to create a “protected” democracy, with 1) a permanent tutelary role for the military; 2) Prohibition of persons, parties and movements whose views and objectives were judged by the Constitutional Tribunal to promote “class struggle;” and 3) a series of checks on representative governmental institutions, such as the military-dominated National Security Council (COSENA) with the power to override Congress or the civilian president; “designated” senators; required supermajorities to pass legislation in Congress, allowing the minority right-wing parties to block amendments or changes, among others..

I analyzed guardian democracies in the 90s in Chile and in other countries transitioning from military rule in Latin America. In Chile the 1980 Constitution essentially erased the state and erased popular participation. It was reformed a number of times after the transition, especially in 2005, but the charter is still in place today as a heritage of an antidemocratic dictatorship.

One key antecedent to today’s mobilizations were the huge marches every week in 2011 by students demanding an end to Pinochet’s privatized model of education. To give you some statistics from that

year: 1) Professor Andrés Zahler Torres of Diego Portales University showed that about 60% of the population lived with a worse income level than the people of Angola, while 20% received income equal to or greater than people from rich countries, such as the United States and Norway; 2) A study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) distributed in August 2011 stated that Chilean universities were the most expensive in Latin America: three times the cost of the Italian, four of the Spanish, five of the Belgians and 19 of those of France; 3) The OECD stressed that family budgets carried 39% of the cost of all education expenses in Chile, the highest of 33 members of the organization and almost double the proportion in the United States. Chile dedicated just 0.4% of its gross national product to education, while allocating about 15% to the military.

Sebastián Piñera, reelected in 2018 (with a large percentage of abstentions), began undermining reforms made under the Bachelet government in the areas of education and abortion rights, using administrative means and technicalities to undo years of democratic debate and avoiding Congress, which had a newly elected range of left and center-left forces. He also acted to harden antiterrorist laws, which have been used largely against Mapuche land-rights activists. The result was to produce a sense of frustration and impotence in the public as well as increased cynicism toward elected government.

All of these developments prompted doubts and concerns regarding Chile's "eternal transition" from military rule, the autonomy and severe violence of repressive forces without regard for human rights, and the difficulty of dislodging the neoliberal, pro-market model despite the desires of a majority of the population. Polls today show that some 80% of Chileans want a new constitution that protects human rights, including social rights such as access to water, quality and free public education, a good public health system, and decent pensions.

This brings us to the recent social explosion in Chile, now at its 50th day. Today *chilenos* are demanding democratization of state and society and attention to their social, political, and economic rights, as well as the right to a non-toxic environment. There is a political crisis (an unresponsive, repressive government, with only 5% support for Piñera; a discredited Congress), a social and economic crisis (privatized healthcare, pensions, water, education) and an environmental crisis (toxic industrial pollution that poisons people and drought accompanied by agribusinesses siphoning off water and leaving communities like Petorca dry). People want structural change, not little fixes.

The social upheaval began with a metro fare rise—the fourth in recent months—which came on top of constant rises in all utilities. Salaries are low in Chile and prices are high (European prices, Third World salaries). Moreover, pensions are less than minimum wage (about \$400/month), impossible to live on in neoliberal Chile. The public health sector, to which 80% of *chilenos* belong, is crumbling, with long wait times. Privatized education is so expensive that families are forced into debt. There are parallel health and education systems, one for the rich and one for the majority. There is no social safety net in Chile and inequality is extreme.

High school students began the revolt by using mass evasions, jumping metro turnstiles. People showed their solidarity by honking horns and pounding pots (*cacerolazos*). The slogan appeared, "It's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years," referring to the difficult conditions for the majority since the transition. On October 18 after clashes between students and Carabineros (the militarized police) the government closed the entire metro system, as millions of people were trying to get home from work. Santiago exploded in fury. Unknown people set fires in metro stations and damaged some buildings, especially in poorer neighborhoods.

That night Piñera imposed a curfew and a State of Emergency, and called out the armed forces to repress the social movement, for the first time since the Pinochet regime. He announced a few days

later, surrounded by military officers, that “we are at war with a powerful and implacable enemy.” Videos and photos of police and military brutality began to appear on twitter and Instagram, further outraging the public. The next Friday there was an enormous demonstration of 1.2 million people in Plaza Italia, the biggest demonstration ever in Chile. The streets were packed with a broad range of people, there was music and dance, puppets, flags, and signs, and it was a peaceful march. These demonstrations have continued up until today—after 6 weeks—despite the aggressive attacks of the Carabineros against peaceful protesters, using tanks that spew water jets infused with burning chemicals and pepper gas.

These protests have been spontaneous, arising in all parts of the country. The political parties have not been in the lead. Gradually the demands have crystalized into one: a democratic Constitution to replace Pinochet’s. One impressive development has been the rise of *cabildos*: people’s assemblies to discuss grievances, imagine structural change and debate what a new constitution should look like. All sectors of society have formed *cabildos*: neighbors, students, professors, artists, doctors. Society is totally politicized. As another key slogan says, “Chile woke up” (*Chile despertó*)

Piñera’s response has been to shift from offers of small concessions to militarization and terrible repression. He reversed the metro fare hike, lifted the State of Emergency, changed some despised cabinet members, and finally agreed in principle to a plebiscite in April (he did not agree at first). Just a few days ago the government offered a “bonus” to pensioners—without touching the privatized model that impoverishes them. Piñera had originally offered a 20% raise, which is laughable. The bill negotiated with the opposition establishes a 50% raise for pensioners over 80 in December: but the life expectancy in Chile is 79 years. A pensioner who receives 110.210 pesos (US\$130), will get 165.000 pesos (US\$207). Those aged 75 to 79 get a 30% raise, and those less than 75 get 25%. A second raise will supposedly take place in January 2021 and another in January 2022 to give everyone a 50% raise. But the privatized pension system remains in place, and it is still impossible to live in Chile with US\$207 a month.

Moreover, there are grave human rights abuses that have not been seen since the dictatorship. One appalling practice of the Carabineros is shooting at people’s faces. Over 350 people have suffered mutilated eyes and permanent ocular damage and two people have lost both eyes. Police shoot bullets or tear gas canisters at close range. This is a world record of eye injuries, surpassing any other, including during decades of Israel-Palestine conflict. There are frequent gassings of people who are protesting or who are onlookers. Twenty-six people have died, some in unclear circumstances. A recent report by the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights documented some 21,000 detentions; 13,000 people wounded; 106 reported cases of sexual violence (including rape) of women; 517 cases of torture; and broken bones and other injuries. The police have driven over people and sprayed people in the face. They have attacked medical personal and press people with clearly marked uniforms. Their violence violates even their own protocols. Many videos and photos document this.

Additionally, the Carabineros do not go after vandals who destroy property or loot supermarkets. They do go after peaceful protesters. In fact, there are documented cases of police infiltrators and even members of right-wing parties leading looting episodes, and other cases of police standing by while stores are looted. The general view in Chile is that the vandals—who are a minority in the demonstrations—are lumpen (very poor people marginalized by the neoliberal system), infiltrators, or street drug dealers. The police also have a history of *montajes*: staging episodes to criminalize people, discredit the movement, and create a climate of chaos. Looters who have been confirmed include a functionary of the extreme-right Unión Democrática Independente (UDI); a councilman of the rightist party Renovación Nacional (RN) in La Calera; a Carabinero who coordinated looting and gave the green light; and members of the Navy in Hualpén. Meanwhile, there are no suspects in the burnings of 20 metro stations, some of which took place in restricted areas (many *chilenos* are

suspicious).

The uprisings today are popular and spontaneous and the parties are scrambling to keep up. There is a spectrum of parties in Chile, from the left (Partido Comunista, PC, Partido Socialista, PS, Frente Amplio, FA) to the center (Christian Democrats) to the right (RN, the neoliberal right, and UDI, which includes former members of Pinochet's dictatorship). On Nov. 15 ruling alliance and opposition political forces presented a 12-point "Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution." They agreed to hold a plebiscite in April 2020, to ask people 1) if they wanted a new constitution and 2) who should write it, a constituent assembly of citizens or made up of half legislators, half ordinary citizens. This was historic in some ways. But the process is long and extended and there were no specific words to guarantee gender parity, independent (non-party) participation by social leaders and activists, or indigenous inclusion. The constitutional assembly would be elected in October 2020 and begin work. The constitutional text will have to be approved by means of a "ratifying plebiscite" that will be carried out in September 2021 with a mandatory vote. The vote must take place "60 days after" the proposal of the new Magna Carta is delivered. Clearly the Right is hoping the social movement will dissipate due to the long time period and/or the repression.

The PC refused to endorse the proposal and so did the Unidad Social, a group of some 200 unions and social organizations. The PC had rejected negotiating with the government regarding the new Constitution because the process was too drawn out and citizens did not have an explicit role in the accord. The FA did sign on but then some 150 party members resigned in protest. People want active participation. The Right inserted a clause saying that every article in the new constitution will require approval by a two-thirds majority in Congress, again making it easier for the Right to block changes. Just the other day the Unidad Social released its own proposal for a constitutional process, giving the vote to young people 14 and older and insuring gender parity and indigenous representation (time constraints have prevented me from studying this proposal in depth).

Last week Piñera submitted a new law to allow the armed forces to "safeguard strategic points" without having to declare a State of Emergency. Moreover, he submitted a law to criminalize common protest tactics such as putting barricades in the street, blocking traffic, occupying schools, or using a bandana or *capucha*—all now punishable for up to 5 years. The FA voted for it, and the next day said they had made a mistake. But people were outraged by this collaboration with Piñera, who is trying to facilitate militarization and weaken legitimate social protest on a permanent basis.

What is so impressive is that the people of Chile are united in a profound national rebellion against the social inequality and authoritarian model embedded in the Chilean Constitution and the repressive actions taken by the government. Cities from north to south have seen huge marches and demonstrations. People want a voice and they want social justice.

To make a brief mention of the art and music emerging from this struggle: Chileans are very creative and always include dance and music in marches. People have sung classic songs by Víctor Jara and Los Prisioneros. In the demonstration of 1.2 million people a large group called Mil Guitarras por Víctor Jara (1000 guitars for Víctor Jara) played his songs. There have been mass bike rides to protest. Demonstrators have worn patches on their eyes to symbolize the hundreds of people blinded. A women's group called LasTesis has organized mass performances to protest machismo and rape by the state, and videos of these performances have gone viral. Now women around the world have replicated these performances, making a powerful statement.

The future in Chile is unclear. People are strong and determined and there are encouraging signs. But the government is closed and intransigent and state violence has not lessened despite urgent reports of excessive police force by Human Rights Watch, the National Institute of Human Rights in

Chile, Amnesty International, the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights, and other national human rights organizations and medical associations. I have faith in the courage, conviction, and creativity of the *chilenos*. But concerned people should stay alert, because international solidarity is crucial. A militarized regime in Chile that neutralizes the popular movement would be a serious setback for all of Latin America.