

## Allende's Leftist Regime

*"I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people."*  
Henry Kissinger

By the end of the 1960s, the polarization of Chilean politics had overwhelmed the traditional civility of Chile's vaunted democratic institutions. The centrist agreements of the past, which had enabled presidents to navigate a difficult course of compromise and conciliation, became more difficult to attain. The American Central Intelligence Agency had influenced elections in Chile dating back to 1958, but in 1970 the socialist candidate, a physician named Salvador Allende, was elected president. In a reflection of Chile's increased ideological polarization, Allende was elected president with 36.2 percent of the vote in 1970. Unable or unwilling to form coalitions, the left, center, and right had all nominated their own candidates in the mistaken hope of obtaining a majority.

President Nixon directed CIA to prevent Allende's inauguration through a military coup. One of the opponents of a coup, Army Chief of Staff General Rene Schneider was assassinated, but Allende took office as scheduled.

The Allende experiment enjoyed a triumphant first year, followed by two disastrous final years. According to the Popular Unity [ Unidad Popular - UP] coalition, Chile was being exploited by parasitic foreign and domestic capitalists. The government therefore moved quickly to socialize the economy, taking over the copper mines, other foreign firms, oligopolistic industries, banks, and large estates. By a unanimous vote of Congress in 1971, the government totally nationalized the foreign copper firms, which were mainly owned by two United States companies, Kennecott and Anaconda. The nationalization measure was one of the few bills Allende ever got through the opposition-controlled legislature, where the Christian Democrats constituted the largest single party.

Socialization of the means of production spread rapidly and widely. The government took over virtually all the great estates. It turned the lands over to the resident workers, who benefited far more than the owners of tiny plots or the numerous migrant laborers. By 1972 food production had fallen and food imports had risen. Also during 1971-72, the government dusted off emergency legislation from the 1932 Socialist Republic to allow it to expropriate industries without congressional approval. It turned many factories over to management by the workers and the state.

In his first year, Allende also employed Keynesian measures to hike salaries and wages, thus pumping up the purchasing power of the middle and working classes. This "consumer revolution" benefited 95 percent of the population in the short run because prices were held down and employment went up. Producers responded to rising demand by employing previously underused capacity.

Politically, Allende faced problems holding his Popular Unity coalition together, pacifying the more leftist elements inside and outside Popular Unity and, above all, coping with the increasingly implacable opposition. Within Popular Unity, the largest party was the Socialist Party. Although composed of multiple factions, the Socialist Party mainly pressed Allende to accelerate the transition toward socialism. The second most important element was the PCCh, which favored a more gradual, legalistic approach. Outside the Popular Unity, the most significant left-wing organization was the MIR, a tiny but provocative group that admired the Cuban Revolution and encouraged peasants and workers to take property and the revolutionary process into their own hands, much faster than Allende preferred.

The most important opposition party was the PDC. As it and the middle sectors gradually shifted to the right, they came to form an anti-Allende bloc in combination with the National Party and the propertied class. Even farther to the right were minuscule, paramilitary, quasi-fascist groups like Fatherland and Liberty (Patria y Libertad), determined to sabotage Popular Unity.

The Popular Unity government tried to maintain cordial relations with the United States, even while staking out an independent position as a champion of developing nations and socialist causes. It opened diplomatic relations with Cuba, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), and Albania. It befriended the Soviet Union, which sent aid to the Allende administration, although far less than Cuba received or than Popular Unity had hoped for.

Meanwhile, the United States pursued a two-track policy toward Allende's Chile. At the overt level, Washington was frosty, especially after the nationalization of the copper mines; official relations were unfriendly but not openly hostile. The

government of President Richard M. Nixon launched an economic blockade conjunction with U.S. multinationals (ITT, Kennecott, Anaconda) and banks (Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank). The US squeezed the Chilean economy by terminating financial assistance and blocking loans from multilateral organizations. But during 1972 and 1973 the US increased aid to the military, a sector unenthusiastic toward the Allende government. The United States also increased training Chilean military personnel in the United States and Panama.

*According to notes taken by CIA director Richard Helms at a 1970 meeting in the Oval Office, his orders were to "make the economy scream." It was widely reported that at the covert level the United States worked to destabilize Allende's Chile by funding opposition political groups and media and by encouraging a military coup d'état. The agency trained members of the fascist organization Patria y Libertad (PyL) in guerrilla warfare and bombing, and they were soon waging a campaign of arson. CIA also sponsored demonstrations and strikes, funded by ITT and other US corporations with Chilean holdings. CIA-linked media, including the country's largest newspaper, fanned the flames of crisis. While these United States actions contributed to the downfall of Allende, no one has established direct United States participation in the coup d'état and few would assign the United States the primary role in the destruction of that government.*

During the second and third years of the UP, demand outstripped supply, the economy shrank, deficit spending snowballed, new investments and foreign exchange became scarce, the value of copper sales dropped, shortages appeared, and inflation skyrocketed, eroding the previous gains for the working class. A thriving black market sprang up. The government responded with direct distribution systems in working-class neighborhoods. Worker participation in the management of enterprises reached unprecedented proportions. The strapped government could not keep the economy from going into free fall because it could not impose austerity measures on its supporters in the working class, get new taxes approved by Congress, or borrow enough money abroad to cover the deficit.

Although the right was on the defensive in Allende's first year, it moved on the offensive and forged an alliance with the center in the next two years. In Congress this center-right coalition erected a blockade against all Popular Unity initiatives, harassed Popular Unity cabinet ministers, and denounced the administration as illegitimate and unconstitutional, thus setting the stage for a military takeover. The most acrimonious battle raged over the boundaries of Popular Unity's "social property area" (área de propiedad social), which would incorporate private holdings through government intervention, requisition, or expropriation. The Supreme Court and the comptroller general of the republic joined Congress in criticizing the executive branch for overstepping its constitutional bounds.

Allende tried to stabilize the situation by organizing a succession of cabinets, but none of them guaranteed order. His appointment of military officers to cabinet posts in 1972 and 1973 also failed to stifle the opposition. Instead, it helped politicize the armed services. Outside the government, Allende's supporters continued direct takeovers of land and businesses, further disrupting the economy and frightening the propertied class.

The two sides reached a showdown in the March 1973 congressional elections. The opposition expected the Allende coalition to suffer the typical losses of Chilean governments in midterm elections, especially with the economy in a tailspin. The National Party and PDC hoped to win two-thirds of the seats, enough to impeach Allende. They netted 55 percent of the votes, not enough of a majority to end the stalemate. Moreover, the Popular Unity's 43 percent share represented an increase over the presidential tally of 36.2 percent and gave Allende's coalition six additional congressional seats; therefore, many of his adherents were encouraged to forge ahead.

In the aftermath of the indecisive 1973 congressional elections, both sides escalated the confrontation and hurled threats of insurgency. Street demonstrations became almost daily events and increasingly violent. Right-wing groups, such as Fatherland and Liberty, and left-wing groups, such as the MIR, brandished arms and called for a cataclysmic solution. The most militant workers formed committees in their neighborhoods and workplaces to press for accelerated social change and to defend their gains. The opposition began openly knocking on the doors of the barracks in hopes that the military would provide a solution.

The regular armed forces halted an attempted coup by tank commanders in June 1973, but that incident warned the nation that the military was getting restless. Thereafter, the armed forces prepared for a massive coup by stepping up raids to search for arms among Popular Unity's supporters. Conditions worsened in June, July, and August, as middle- and upper-class business proprietors and professionals launched another wave of workplace shutdowns and lockouts, as they had in late 1972. Their 1973 protests against the government coincided with strikes by the trucking industry and by the left's erstwhile allies among the copper workers. The Nationalists, the Christian Democrats, and conservative students backed the increasingly subversive strikers. They called for Allende's resignation or military intervention. Attempts by the Catholic

Church to get the PDC and Popular Unity to negotiate a compromise came to naught. Meanwhile, inflation reached an annual rate of more than 500 percent. By mid-1973 the economy and the government were paralyzed.

In August 1973, the rightist and centrist representatives in the Chamber of Deputies undermined the president's legitimacy by accusing him of systematically violating the constitution and by urging the armed forces to intervene. In early September, Allende was preparing to call for a rare national plebiscite to resolve the impasse between Popular Unity and the opposition. The military obviated that strategy by launching its attack on civilian authority on the morning of September 11. Just prior to the assault, the commanders in chief, headed by the newly appointed army commander, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, had purged officers sympathetic to the president or the constitution.

Allende either was assassinated or committed suicide while defending (with an assault rifle) his socialist government against the coup d'état. Several cabinet ministers were also assassinated, the universities were put under military control, opposition parties were banned and thousands of Chileans were tortured and killed, many fingered as "radicals" by lists provided by the CIA. Although sporadic resistance to the coup erupted, the military consolidated control much more quickly than it had believed possible. Many Chileans had predicted that a coup would unleash a civil war, but instead it ushered in a long period of repression.

Debate continues over the reasons for Allende's downfall. Right-wing critics in particular accused the left of plotting an armed takeover, a charge that was never proved. Critics also assailed the UP for being unclear about the limits of its reforms and thus frightening the middle class into the arms of the opposition. Critics of the right accused Popular Unity, in conjunction with the United States, of ruining the economy and of calling out the armed forces to protect its property and privileges. Critics of the Christian Democrats chastised them for refusing to compromise, locking arms with the rightist opposition, and failing to defend democracy. Observers in general scolded the far left for its adventurous excesses. Critics of the left blamed Allende for going to extremes, destroying the economy, violating the constitution, and undermining the spirit if not the letter of democracy. The far left retorted that Popular Unity failed because it was too timid to arm the masses.

There was ample blame to go around. Groups at all points on the political spectrum helped destroy the democratic order by being too ideological and too intransigent. A minority president facing adamant domestic and foreign opposition was extremely unlikely to be able to uphold democracy and create socialism at the same time.

The major media in the United States ignored the issue of CIA involvement until 1974, when Michael J. Harrington (D-MA) leaked details of secret Congressional testimony by William Colby. And in late 1975, the Senate Committee headed by Frank Church released the report on "Covert Action in Chile, 1963-1973." In 1982 the movie "Missing," directed by Costa-Gavras and starring Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek, provided a dramatized account of Charles Horman, a 30-year-old American free-lance journalist secretly arrested and executed during the coup.