

# 10 THE FALL AND RISE OF CHILEAN DEMOCRACY: 1973–1989

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*By Kurt Bassuener, 2008; revised 2013*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Chile's Drift into the Abyss**

Chile historically prided itself on its long democratic and constitutional practice, as well as its relative moderation in politics. Unlike many of its neighbours, it experienced military rule for only brief intervals. The armed services maintained a solid professional distance from politics, and even public life.

But Chilean politics became increasingly rancorous and polarized in the 1960s. A division into left, centre and right permeated Chile's civil society. One Chilean, looking back on the era observed that by that point “moderation was always interpreted as a sign of weakness. Anyone who was moderate was presumed to have a sort of complex.”

In 1970, socialist Salvador Allende, the candidate of the left-wing Popular Unity coalition, won the presidency with a 36 percent plurality and was confirmed in Parliament. His victory raised political polarization to new heights. When the economy became rattled in 1971 by investor and market reaction to government intervention, tension between the government's supporters and its critics increased. In response, the Parliament — in which Popular Unity did not hold a majority — adopted, in 1973, a resolution accusing Allende of regularly violating the constitution and attempting to institute a totalitarian system. It was openly speculated that a coup d'état could follow.

### **Coup d'État and Repression**

On September 11, 1973, the armed forces of Chile forcefully took over, bombing and storming La Moneda, the presidential palace in Santiago, against armed

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## FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

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resistance, to find President Allende dead by his own hand. Army General Augusto Pinochet led the armed forces commanders' junta, declaring that Chile was in a "state of war."

The repression against Allende government supporters and anyone deemed threatening was immediate and overwhelming: roughly 7,000 people were detained, brutally interrogated and tortured at the National Stadium, and scores summarily executed. Thousands ran to foreign embassies for protection. Violent repression also struck in rural areas, where it was more difficult to find refuge. Thousands were arrested and many simply "disappeared."

The judiciary, overwhelmingly partial to the coup, did not resist the blatant illegalities being perpetrated, nor did they seek to exercise their prerogatives when civilians were being brought before military tribunals and often executed. Almost no petitions for habeas corpus were accepted.

While many Chileans welcomed the putsch, most believed that the armed forces would return to barracks and allow a return to civilian and democratic rule. They soon learned this was a false hope. Pinochet banned leftist political parties outright, suspended others, and in 1974 ordered the electoral rolls destroyed.

### **Church versus State: Defending Human Rights**

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The Catholic Church was the only institution capable of resisting the junta's repression. Chilean civil society and any political actors remaining in Chile hunkered down in the aftermath of the coup, concerned with mere survival. "The myriad institutions of civil society, including neighbourhood organizations, sports clubs and professional associations, were prohibited from meeting or tightly controlled," according to the then Ford Foundation representative in Santiago (cited in Puryear, 1994).

Fortunately, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez gave support to those threatened by the junta. The ecumenical Pro-Peace Committee defended victims of human rights abuses, but was closed by Pinochet's order in 1975. The (Catholic) Vicariate of Solidarity succeeded it, helping an estimated 700,000 Chileans with legal, health, occupational and nutritional services between 1975 and 1979. International civil society was instrumental in financially sustaining these efforts.

The Church also supported the legal and evidentiary work to defend human rights, before a judiciary nearly totally sympathetic to Pinochet. According to Jaime Castillo, a pre-Allende justice minister who represented hundreds of prisoners and missing leftists, "judges almost always reacted negatively to us; they were servile and afraid, and so bitter against the Popular Unity [Allende's government]." As Ignacio Walker, later to serve as foreign minister after the return to democracy, recalled in a personal interview, "As a human rights lawyer, I lost all my cases... But winning wasn't the point. We could still protect people by making their cases publicly known. The cost was higher" for the regime to do them further harm. The World Council of Churches in Geneva played a pivotal role in publicizing such cases. While this activity was nettlesome to the regime, it was tolerated. Confronting

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973-1989

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the Church would spur social resistance in predominantly Catholic Chile. The voluminous documentation collected throughout the post-coup years on arrests and locations of detention became instrumental in establishing the truth of what happened to thousands of Chileans deemed “enemies” of the regime. What was preserved and accomplished in these especially harsh years provided the building blocks for Chile’s democratic revival.

### **Authoritarian “Institutionalization”**

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While theoretically the first among equals in the junta, Pinochet proved more politically skilled at infighting than his rivals. He rapidly personalized and consolidated power, pressuring the junta to confer upon him the title “President of the Republic.” Pinochet claimed it was his destiny to rule, and set out to remake Chile with a “protected” political order that would preserve his role far into the future.

Following the UN General Assembly’s condemnation of the regime’s human rights abuses in December 1977, Pinochet called a “consultation” at the beginning of 1978, in which citizens were called to vote on whether to “support President Pinochet in his defence of the dignity of Chile” against “international aggression” and to legitimize “the process of institutionalization.” A “yes” was represented by a Chilean flag; a “no” by a black one. The process, marred by inherent fraud (there was no voter register) and intimidation, led to a 75 percent “yes” vote.

In 1980, Pinochet promulgated a constitution that retained firm military control of government. Yet Pinochet consented to holding a plebiscite in eight years’ time from the adoption of the constitution and his simultaneous “election” as president — he was the sole candidate — on September 11, 1980, the seventh anniversary of the putsch. He assumed that his “re-election” in 1988 would be a foregone conclusion, but the stipulation for a plebiscite in 1988 led to Pinochet’s undoing as Chile’s dictator.

Part of Pinochet’s “institutionalization” included radical economic reform, spearheaded by free marketeers educated abroad, dubbed the “Chicago Boys.” Central to their effort to reform the Chilean economy was the privatization of state assets, often at knockdown prices. Global financial markets initially responded enthusiastically, dulling the impact of denial of credits from IFIs. The new policies spurred an economic boom in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the growth came to an abrupt end with a set of banking failures that led to state intervention to prop them up. The downward spiral accelerated, leading to a serious economic crisis.

### **Fighting Brain Drain and Building Intellectual Capital for Change**

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Support to think tanks and policy research groups served to keep talented Chileans from joining the mass brain drain and engaged in investigating avenues to promote a return to democratic rule. Since their activities were academic in nature

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or packaging, more leeway was granted to them by the regime. “Some of the finest social science research in Latin America came to be associated with the Chilean informal academic sector,” according to Chile expert Oxford Professor Alan Angell (1996) — and it relied almost entirely on foreign funding.

### **Exile’s Silver Lining**

Following the catastrophic failure of Chile’s democratic institutions, the period in exile was one of deep soul-searching and analysis of what could have brought on the crisis and coup. A common recognition slowly crystallized among them that functioning democracy provided the only protection for human rights, and this required a will to compromise.

While all Chilean democrats subjected themselves and their ideologies to rigorous self-criticism, the socialists, the most numerous component of Allende’s Popular Unity government, were affected the most profoundly. According to future President Ricardo Lagos, “Never in the history of Chile have so many Chilean women and men with varied degrees of cultural exposure — social leaders, politicians, heads of local associations, and many more — move[d] into the world...exile left its imprint, leading us to recognize the value of democracy, the higher value of human rights... abandoning the classical tools of the left in the 1960s and ‘70s, to be replaced by a revalorization of democracy, of human rights, of the place of the market” (cited in Sznajder and Roniger, 2007). Chilean leftists developed an appreciation for European social democracy, which they once scorned.

Christian Democrats, inflexible prior to the coup, were also affected. Some left for Venezuela where they found their sister party had a different approach, valuing the virtues of compromise.

### **Economic Shock and Popular Reaction: Civil Society Stands Up**

Protests and demonstrations began in 1983, sparked by a 14 percent contraction in GDP. Copper miners union leader Rodolfo Seguel organized the Workers’ National Command and called for a National Day of Protest, which successfully conveyed public discontent to the regime for the first time since the coup. This popular discontent from below began opening society and revived political parties, which remained illegal.

Pinochet appointed rightist National Party leader Sergio Onofre Jarpa as interior minister and authorized him to initiate an *apertura* (“opening”) for dialogue with right and centrist opposition parties.

Catholic Church Cardinal Francisco Fresno convened democratic opposition in the mid-1980s to forge unity. Attempts to bind the opposition together began in 1983 with the Democratic Alliance of centrist and rightist parties. This was followed by the National Accord for Transition to Full Democracy in 1985, which allied the moderate wing of the split Socialists with Christian Democrats for the first time.

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973–1989

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The Accord demanded an immediate return to democracy with free elections, and continued to reject the 1980 constitution, with its scheduled 1988 plebiscite.

Chile's society remained divided through this period between those who saw the regime as a shield against chaos — a perception Pinochet did his best to promote, and those who saw dictatorial rule as the country's fundamental problem. According to Christian Democrat Genaro Arriagada, "There were really two worlds, two Chiles superimposed."

Demonstrations had no apparent impact. A daring 1986 attempt by leftist militants to assassinate Pinochet while leaving his country residence gave the dictator a needed pretext to violently re-impose a state of siege, and to tap into latent "middle Chilean" fears of chaos. One Chilean noted "we sank into total depression at the end of '86 because everything had failed — the communist strategy [of direct confrontation in street fights and raids] and the non-communist strategy [of demanding open elections]." There was still no strategy to end Pinochet's one-man rule.

### **If at First You Don't Succeed...Take Stock**

In the next two years, Chile's civil society and political opposition reflected, studied and debated, and developed a consensus strategy to never again allow the radical polarization that allowed military dictatorship to take hold. Chile's research institutes and think tanks were pivotal.

Non-communist parties were legalized in 1987. Late that fall, Chilean social scientists met outside Santiago to review survey data they had collected, showing ambient fear pervasive in Chile's traumatized society. A divisive competitive electoral campaign would redound to Pinochet's advantage; he could all too easily portray it as the "chaos" he had long warned against. But a strategy of embracing the plebiscite and engaging the full democratic spectrum to generate votes for the "no" held promise: it could breach the fear barrier that kept Pinochet in power, allowing truly free elections to follow.

This was initially a hard sell with many politicians who felt this would be a capitulation to Pinochet and an acceptance of his illegal constitution. However, they were eventually convinced and devoted themselves to drumming up support for the "no."

### **Think Tanks, Civil Society and Opposition Work Together for the "No"**

Civil society, policy think tanks and political parties aligned in a coordinated coalition to generate support for a "no" vote. This involved a massive nationwide grassroots effort to register citizens to vote, undertaken by the Crusade for Citizen Participation (Civic Crusade), which worked, in particular, to register disaffected urban youth who doubted political change could be attained without violence. The Command for the No established itself in offices around the country to generate support for a "no" vote in the plebiscite. The political opposition aligned itself for

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## FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

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the effort in a wider spectrum than ever before — eventually 17 parties — in the Concertación. The plebiscite was promoted as a referendum on the hated dictatorship.

Getting citizens to register, encouraging them to overcome fear to vote, and building confidence and hope that victory and a brighter future were possible were all critical to success. Innovation and creativity were also in abundant supply. The Civic Crusade held free rock concerts with bands that were normally kept off the airwaves — 18–30 year olds needed only show their voter ID cards for entry. For the month before the vote, the free TV campaign spots were set at a late hour — 11:15 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. nightly — which the regime thought would limit viewership. But these creative promotional spots were built around the Command for the No's upbeat theme: “Joy is Coming!” and were viewed en masse.<sup>1</sup> “We managed to register seven million of eight million potential voters,” reminisced Ignacio Walker in a personal interview. “We spread the ‘good news’ that this plebiscite was a unique chance.”

### **The “No”s Have It!**

In the plebiscite on October 5, 1988, the “no” won a decisive 55 percent victory, drawing massive turnout of over 90 percent of voters. Those within the junta who resented Pinochet's dominance welcomed the result. The air force chief acknowledged defeat with a smile on his way in to meet his colleagues, before the official media announced the result. Pinochet had to accept the “no” victory which, by the constitution, would require free presidential elections the following year.

## **INTERNATIONAL POLICY TOWARD THE PINOCHET REGIME**

In 1973, international reaction to the coup against Allende had been swift and almost uniformly negative; Swedish Premier Olof Palme spoke for most of the democratic world when he bluntly described the junta as “despicable crooks.”

Many democracies, and a number of non-democracies, acted immediately through their embassies to protect persons seeking asylum from persecution. Over the coming months and years, thousands of Chileans were resettled all over the globe. The fact that there were so many Chilean exiles elsewhere in Latin America (particularly in Venezuela, Mexico and Argentina — until its 1976 coup), in Europe and in North America (mostly Canada) gave Chilean democracy advocates a wide network in academia and civil society, as well as high visibility. The Soviet bloc took in many leftist refugees through its diplomatic missions and secondary routes. Many

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<sup>1</sup> A recent dramatic film on the development of the “no” campaign, directed by Chilean Pablo Larrain and starring Mexican actor Gael García Bernal, simply titled *No*, was released in 2012. The film shows the difficulties of overcoming misgivings in the opposition camp to a marketing campaign with a positive focus. The author enjoyed the film and found it a faithful representation of the effort. The trailer is available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOeiw\\_BJPas](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOeiw_BJPas).

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973–1989

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Marxists gravitated to the Soviet Union, East Germany and even Romania, where Nicolae Ceaucescu had just become enamoured of Mao's Cultural Revolution. But even convinced Marxists found the atmosphere in the socialist bloc stifling and later opted to relocate.

Estimates of the number exiled vary widely, but it easily ran into the tens of thousands, and likely much higher. As of 1982, an estimated 44 percent of Chilean expatriates were in Venezuela and Mexico, with another three percent in other Latin American countries. Democratic Europe collectively was host to another nearly 40 percent, with the largest groups living in Spain, France, Italy and Sweden. Canada hosted a further nearly seven percent, and Australia nearly six percent. By this stage, less than three percent were living in the Soviet bloc. Paris and Rome were especially popular destinations, seen as cultural oases linguistically and politically close to home.

“European governments and parties felt a special affinity with Chile. The Chilean opposition had a concept of democracy that was clearly similar to that of most European political movements, based on a combination of fair elections, social justice, and the observance of basic human rights” (Angell, 1996: 192). German party foundations — *Stiftungen* — were very involved in Chile in the 1980s, with the Christian Democratic Konrad Adenauer Stiftung estimated to have spent about 25 million Deutschmarks in Chile from 1983–1988, and its socialist counterpart the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung spending almost 10 million Deutschmarks.

Chile's enviably strong network with foreign academia, politics and civic life was sustained with openness and generosity to political refugees. Chilean Andrés Zaldívar was leader of the Christian Democratic International in Spain. The Institute for the New Chile was founded in Rotterdam. Rome-based Chile Democratico, the collaborative effort of two Christian Democrats and two Popular Unity members, published *Chile-América* from 1974–1984. It gained a worldwide readership, with informed policy debates and analysis, along with human rights reporting from Chile. External funding from Western European governments kept these initiatives afloat.

Most democracies maintained consistent anti-Pinochet policies, decrying human rights abuses in international fora and supporting through various channels Chilean civil society, but some influential democracies' policies fluctuated considerably between 1973 and 1988. In addition, arms sales continued from a number of European countries. Britain's Labour Party governments in the 1970s curtailed arms sales and withdrew their ambassador from Santiago after abuse of a British dual national, but full representation — and an end to an embargo — returned with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. France's policy toward Chile took a markedly more critical turn with the arrival of Socialist President François Mitterrand in 1981, and new arms deals were not signed. As Portugal and Spain underwent democratic transitions after the coup, the favour that Marcelo Caetano and Francisco Franco had showered on Pinochet turned to hostility.

Democracies also put their money where their mouths were. “In per capita terms, amongst the most generous of the aid donors was the Netherlands,” according to

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## FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

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Alan Angell in a personal interview. He notes that the Dutch government established and funded a number of policy institutes that were incubators for Chilean exiles and experts. The Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries and Canadian International Development Research Centre were also generous.

Perhaps the most influential shifts in policy came from Washington. US President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger did little to hide their relief at the ouster of a government that they asserted was turning Chile into “another Cuba.” The brief Ford administration continued this, but reacted harshly to the 1976 car bombing assassination of Allende’s Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier in downtown Washington, which killed an American citizen. The Carter administration was much harder on the Pinochet regime, co-sponsoring resolutions on human rights in the UN and applying financial levers. The Reagan administration disavowed Carter’s human rights oriented policies and welcomed a positive relationship with Pinochet. US ambassador, political appointee and ideologue James Theberge even attended the eleventh anniversary of the coup, when other ambassadors stayed away. But this shifted definitively early in Reagan’s second term, with Secretary of State George Shultz’s decision in early 1985 to replace Theberge with career diplomat Harry Barnes, Jr. Among arguments for this policy shift was the rank inconsistency of arguing for democracy in Sandinista Nicaragua while backing a blatant military dictatorship in Chile. Congress, in contrast to the White House, was consistently vocal against Pinochet, the most active and vocal of all being Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who initiated a cutoff of military aid to Chile in 1976 and generated congressional demands for human rights assessments on recipients of American aid.

## RESOURCES AND ASSETS OF DIPLOMATS IN CHILE

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In Chile, especially in the weeks after the coup, diplomats employed their **immunity** to protect human life, evidenced by Swedish Ambassador Harald Edelstam, who Pinochet expelled, and many others. Much later, US Ambassador Harry Barnes, Jr. was so assertive in his efforts to help Chileans restore their democracy that Pinochet considered declaring him *persona non grata*.

Most diplomats in Santiago were able to count on the public support of their home authorities in opposing the regime. Ambassador Barnes lined up comprehensive backing with the executive branch, but also major figures in Congress and NGOs. The visible backing of the higher reaches of government encourages NGOs and donors to take notice and devote more resources, confident that their efforts will be effective. This was the case in Chile.

Pinochet wanted to appear immune to influence by external actors, but was vulnerable to political conditionality on IFI credits. This leverage was employed repeatedly. Backed by the full US government, the assertive Ambassador Barnes

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973–1989

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may have lost a lot of his influence with Pinochet, but correspondingly gained it with the opposition and civil society, which had felt abandoned by the regime-focused “quiet diplomacy” of the Reagan administration’s early years. Many countries had strong moral and cultural influence on Chilean civil society, such as Venezuela with its two-party democracy and Germany’s support through the Stiftungen. Spanish socialist Prime Minister Felipe González was highly regarded.

In most cases, funds to assist civil society and political opposition did not go through embassies, but direct channels, mostly private and quasi-public (such as the Stiftungen). Ambassadors on the ground had a role in helping these donors and programmatic organizations in their targeting and in suggesting new funding efforts — especially before the plebiscite.

The democratic states’ diplomats had a rich vein of legitimacy to mine in Chile — namely the full array of international human rights treaties and guarantees to which Chile had been party, enthusiastically, in its democratic and multilateralist pre-Pinochet days. The French and Dutch ambassadors referred to Chile’s obligations under the Universal Declaration on Human Rights when opposition leftists were seized in 1984. Diplomats regularly invoked them when taken to task by the regime for appearances with victims of human rights abuses, demanding information about those disappeared and demarching the government for its transgressions of international norms.

## **WAYS THESE ASSETS WERE APPLIED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN CHILE**

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### **Golden Rules**

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Embassies understood the significance of Chile’s democratic tradition, well-developed civic sector and intelligentsia, and assisted individuals at risk by providing asylum and economic assistance, as well as direct assistance to those attempting to keep the embers of freedom alive in the smothering first years of dictatorship, though there was too little space for progress for almost a decade after the coup. The Church was the main protector and non-state actor, through the Pro-Peace Committee and its successor, the Vicariate of Solidarity.

Chile’s strong cadre of academics, professionals and intellectuals had studied abroad and had wide networks well before the coup. Many suffered persecution, including expulsion from their positions in academia and administration, and consequently left Chile for positions overseas, leaving Chilean academia decimated. The international community recognized the necessity of maintaining this human resource in Chile, and numerous donors, some public and many private, helped maintain a lifeline for them by financing academic policy research institutes. In addition, diplomats such as Ambassador Barnes respected Chilean civil society by publicly engaging them upon his arrival. Barnes met publicly with Christian

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Democrat leader Gabriel Valdés soon after presenting his credentials to Pinochet, and with civil society figures in advance of introductions to Pinochet's officialdom, which riled Pinochet greatly. The optics and reality of an ambassador listening to civil society were important in rebuilding civic self-confidence and optimism. As Valdés noted at the time, "The embassy has changed completely for us."

Though there was little systematic information sharing among diplomatic missions, there were ad hoc examples of collaboration in protecting threatened Chileans, especially in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 coup. Diplomatic missions certainly interacted and compared notes regularly with the other international actors on the Chilean scene, such as political party foundations, international labour union representatives and the international press corps. Later, Ambassador Barnes created and headed the Western Hemisphere Democracy Group, including the Argentine, Brazilian and Costa Rican ambassadors. According to Barnes, "We exchanged information and discussed how we [and our governments] might be more effective in promoting greater respect for human rights and democracy" (cited in Palmer, 2003). French Ambassador Leon Bouvier was also a strong advocate for human rights and democracy.

### **Truth in Communications**

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Immediately after the coup, embassy **reporting** was vital to convey the severity of violence and repression. With access to information utterly closed at the outset and still restrictive even at the most liberal stage of the Pinochet regime, this transmission mechanism was important. Evidence of the massive human rights abuses endemic to Pinochet's regime often reached the international public — and Chileans — through this channel.

**Informing** the Chilean public of their solidarity and policies was nearly impossible with the self-censorship of non-government vetted media, though publications by expatriates, such as *Chile-América* out of Rome, received assistance.

The diplomatic pouch was among many tools that Chilean human rights activists could rely upon to convey details of human rights abuses to the international community. Once safely outside and reported, this information could circulate back to Chilean society at large through foreign broadcast media and expatriate publications, conveying the truth about the regime's dark practices. As space for independent media opened in the 1980s, diplomats directed assistance to independent media such as *Analisis*, *La Epoca* and CIEPLAN's popular economic review.

### **Working with the Government**

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From the beginning of his 16 years in power in 1973 to the end in 1989, Pinochet was an international pariah, rarely leaving the country. Few invitations were forthcoming. In 1980, Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos disinvited Pinochet from a planned state visit while Pinochet was en route to Manila. Pinochet was once again humiliated in 1983, when his government announced it was invited to

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973-1989

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the inauguration of Argentina's democratic president, Raúl Alfonsín, only to have the Argentine Foreign Ministry disavow the invitation, which Pinochet extracted from Argentina's outgoing junta. Sweden made a point of not inviting any Chilean representatives to assassinated Premier Olof Palme's funeral in 1986.

Following the coup, Italy withdrew its ambassador, maintaining a chargé in Santiago until after Pinochet was defeated in the plebiscite. Sweden never replaced its ambassador, expelled in December 1973 for his active defence of human rights. Mexico abandoned relations altogether from 1974 on, after taking in a great number of refugees, including President Allende's widow. Britain withdrew its ambassador in 1975; he was not replaced for over four years.

While relations remained open with a number of democracies represented in Santiago, there was precious little advising of the Pinochet government. Nor were there noteworthy examples of government-to-government dialoguing on human rights and democratic practices, though there were protests from democracies.

Most of the state-to-state communications in the Pinochet dictatorship period are more properly considered **demarching**, such as demands for explanations of actions, pressure to release prisoners or explain "disappearances." French Ambassador Leon Bouvier demanded explanation of the killing of a French priest by police in a poor Santiago barrio. The previous year, he was recalled for consultations by Foreign Minister Cheysson, who called Pinochet a "curse on his people," to protest human rights violations. Ambassador Barnes warned the Pinochet regime not to interfere with the 1988 plebiscite.

### **Reaching Out**

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Diplomats forged connections between Chilean civil society and opposition political figures and counterparts in their home countries as a matter of course, recognizing that creating and maintaining linkages to the outside world was essential. The web connecting Chile to the democratic world developed into an incredibly strong and resilient one. Diplomats interacted consistently with Chilean civil society and complimented the efforts of their own societies to remain engaged.

Democratic embassies — particularly those of Canada and a number of European countries — regularly invited opposition and civic figures to convene for free discussions amongst themselves and the diplomatic corps (which, of course, would tap into this resource for reporting on the situation). This circuit, together with connections which were forged among refugees abroad, developed into a network which proved very important later in planning the return to democracy.

As the repression loosened somewhat in the early and mid-1980s, the diplomatic corps worked to facilitate greater cooperation among the democratic opposition parties. In May 1985, Chilean official media reported the West German Ambassador stating that his country, along with Britain and the US, was willing to mediate between Pinochet's government and the opposition, which had become emboldened by public discontent. Soon thereafter, Ambassador Barnes arrived and pressed opposition politicians to come together behind a common approach to press for an

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## FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

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end to dictatorship. Despite progress in building constructive relationships among parties, there was no clear strategy until late 1987 and early 1988.

Post-disbursed funds were not a major feature of international engagement, but financing by governments, quasi-governmental organizations and private foundations was indispensable for the survival and development of Chilean civil society. Embassies ensured that worthy efforts got noticed, and this lifeline gave Chilean civil society the ability to develop their winning strategy of contesting the plebiscite.

In just one example, the US government had hitherto been far less engaged in financially supporting civil society than its European counterparts, mostly operating through development agencies and quasi-governmental institutes. USAID funded the Civic Crusade, and the National Endowment for Democracy and NDI both assisted the Command for the No.

The most effective **showcasing** of democratic practices and norms was done outside Chile. Chile's tens of thousands of political and intellectual exiles experienced free democratic societies themselves, some after having had the opportunity to see firsthand the "advanced socialism" of the Soviet bloc. The honeymoon in the socialist paradise was brief for most. Socialist Party Secretary General Carlos Altamirano, who like many socialists originally fled to East Germany, later said "I jumped the wall," and was attracted to Paris by France's socialist government under President Mitterrand. Mitterrand and Italian Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer, progenitor of democratic "Eurocommunism," were attractive poles for the exiled Chilean left. Embassies held regular cultural events that displayed the fruits of an open, democratic society.

### **Defending Democrats**

Democratic diplomats regularly and creatively demonstrated their support for democratic principles, fundamental freedoms and human rights in Chile throughout the Pinochet era. Initially, this was accomplished most urgently through providing humanitarian protection to those threatened with death or torture by the regime (see below). Later, diplomats like Carter-era US Ambassador George Landau made clear on his arrival in 1977 that "We can't tell a government what it can do, but we can tell it what will happen if it doesn't do certain things." Recalls of ambassadors were legion in Chile: Mexico severed relations, Sweden never replaced Ambassador Edelstam after he was expelled, Italy didn't reinstitute full ties until after Pinochet was shown the door by voters in 1988, and Britain and France recalled their ambassadors in protests during Pinochet's reign.

Other notable examples were the appearance of a host of democracies' diplomats, including those of France, Spain, Italy, Belgium and the US, at the funeral of a young man burned to death by police in 1986. The young woman who was with him was also severely burned, but survived, and was given asylum and treated in Montreal, Canada.

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973-1989

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Attending events by the opposition, even when it remained illegal, showed the regime that the democratic world recognized these activities as inherently legitimate, not only affording Chilean democrats some insulation from repression, but also showing that the democratic world was with them. The same principle applied to human rights events, at which democratic ambassadors and other diplomats made a point to be visible. The political use of forced exile by the regime was also publicly derided, even as Pinochet tried to earn points by incrementally allowing some exiles to return from the mid-1980s on. As one Western diplomat stated, “exile is not a question of numbers, it is a question of principle. Even one exile is too many.”

Diplomats also encouraged Chilean democrats in their conviction that victory in the plebiscite was not only possible, but likely if the regime did not interfere. “I think the ‘no’ will win, if the process doesn’t get interrupted,” said Ambassador Barnes two days before the vote.

Democracies were very active in protecting Chileans (and other Latin Americans) threatened by the regime. The most vivid examples of this activity should be viewed through a primarily humanitarian lens. In the period immediately following the coup, the National Refugee Commission was set up by leading church figures to get threatened persons to foreign embassies where they could be protected. The stories are quite harrowing and vivid.

Ambassador Edelstam said at the time that “the role of the Swedish Embassy is to save the lives of people who are in danger. We know there are lists of people who supported the former regime and who are considered by the new military authorities [to be] criminals and therefore could be executed.” Edelstam took the entire Cuban Embassy staff under his protection and escorted them to an Aeroflot flight out of Chile. New Zealand Ambassador John McArthur spirited a trade union leader disguised as a woman to the residence before arranging for the Swedish Embassy to arrange for his asylum. While later protecting a Uruguayan woman who had just undergone surgery, Edelstam got into a confrontation with police and was expelled. Mexican Ambassador Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá gave refuge to more than 500 at the embassy and residence. In later testimony to Spanish prosecutors who indicted Pinochet, he noted many of those he sheltered bore signs of torture inflicted at the National Stadium. Two attempted asylum seekers were shot in the back by police at the embassy door.

Immediately after the coup, roughly 50 terrorized Chileans and foreign nationals likely to be persecuted by the regime came to the door of the Canadian Embassy seeking asylum. Without instructions, the young diplomats admitted the Chileans, who remained in the chancery of the embassy until the Canadian government could evacuate them and their families two months later. Venezuela dispatched a plane to get Allende-era Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier after his release in 1974.

Diplomats continued to act throughout the dictatorship to protect Chileans. Though the massive wave of refugees naturally followed the coup and immediate repression, as late as December 1987, there were more than 500 requests for asylum

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## FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

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per month, mostly to Sweden, with large numbers also to Canada and neighbouring (and by then democratic) Argentina.

Through holding public meetings with human rights defenders and other threatened Chileans, diplomats granted an element of protection to them. The Chilean Catholic Church, the Church-backed Vicariate of Solidarity and those operating under its protection performed the most important acts of witnessing, verifying, investigating and documenting the crimes and human rights violations of the Pinochet regime, in addition to the courageous work undertaken by many members of the clergy in protecting and defending human rights activists in danger or in prison.

Diplomats performed this role in the immediate aftermath of the coup as well, availing themselves of their immunity to find some of the missing and to protect a great number of Chileans and foreign nationals who were sought by the regime in its “state of war.” Their reports not only went back to their governments, but frequently to the world at large through the media, generating international outrage.

Chileans planning the “no” campaign determined early on that election observation during the plebiscite would be essential. Many felt the regime was fully capable of killing to maintain power. According to a personal interview with Alan Angell, foreign observers “helped [Chileans] feel they could vote with impunity.” Genaro Arriagada, a Christian Democrat scholar who headed the Technical Committee for the No believed that international observers were the “best guarantee” against fraud, or worse — against a move by the regime to maintain power through “disappearing” electoral workers and voters. As Arriagada said in a personal interview, “Their mere presence in the country is a guarantee...an insurance. That function is invaluable.” Ambassador Barnes and his colleagues, especially from Latin America, ensured that the observers came — roughly 400 of them, officially as “tourists.” High profile international observers included US senators Edward Kennedy and Richard Lugar, as well as former presidents Carter and Ford. “Had the eyes of the world not been on Chile and had there not been international observers for the plebiscite, than I think that Pinochet in any number of ways would have gotten away with it,” thought US Deputy Chief of Mission George Jones. So the democratic world kept the pressure on Pinochet to ensure that the 1989 elections were held.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Diplomats joined the whole wider community of international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations — and their complex open societies back home — to support Chile’s democratic revival. But the success of the “no” campaign by Chile’s civil society, intellectuals and democratic opposition to Pinochet was owed to domestic initiative, strategy and pragmatism.

The latter element had been a traditional feature of Chile’s democratic practice, but was effaced by doctrinaire ideologies in the 1960s. Most Chileans attribute the democratic breakdown in 1973 to domestic factors, despite foreign influence in the 1960s and 1970s, but the experience of losing democracy and its mechanisms

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## DEMOCRACY: 1973–1989

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to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for nearly two decades has informed Chilean society. Former President Ricardo Lagos states that “there is one consensus today shared by everyone: ‘never again.’ Never again can Chile repeat it...that rupture in Chile’s soul. Never again” (BBC Monitoring Americas, 2003).

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