

The final ingredient in Pinochet's deflation, however, was of his own making. Partly to counteract the growing bureaucratization of the regime and to enhance his personal image, Pinochet sought to legitimize once and for all his stature as a national leader. With a made-to-match constitution, with a fragmented opposition, with the undivided support of the armed forces, a coterie of subservient advisers and a buoyant economy out of the throes of the 1982-85 depression, the moment seemed propitious for a new *consulta*. Having survived multiple crises and the worst post-1930 economic recession with negative growth rates of 14 percent, the climate of mid-1988 was objectively favorable to Pinochet; this despite the international isolation of his regime. Surveys of public opinion consistently gave a slight margin in favor of the status quo. Especially influential in his calculation was the opinion of the Army General Staff, whose analysis indicated a good possibility of an electoral triumph.

Pinochet the Candidate

Beginning in early 1988, Pinochet the General attempted to become Pinochet the Candidate. The metamorphosis appeared complete: civilian clothes, a grandfatherly image and an abundance of patronage facilitated by the current economic bonanza. In fact, a trade surplus of over 700 million US dollars went into sewers, telephones, electricity, schools and housing, mostly for lower and middle income Chileans. This born-again populism was multiplied by the regime-controlled mass media, which presented Pinochet as a champion of the poor. However, the exposure of the General's rambling and incoherent demeanor to the public hurt his statesman's image. Moreover, the "soft" approach had its price: the dictator had to compete for votes, largely from those popular sectors which had been the victims of his policies. In this, the General grossly underestimated the political sophistication of his countrymen. Equally important were the unintended consequences of attempting to fashion a democratic facade by allowing a limited amount of political opposition to gain access to the mass media. As the unofficial campaign started, the forces of opposition, disorganized as they were, took advantage of every space and opportunity allowed by the regime. Opposition leaders began to challenge Pinochet openly. Especially important here was the direct attack on Pinochet on television launched by the

leader of the "instrumental" Party for Democracy, socialist economist Ricardo Lagos, in June 1988. The opposition regained confidence and the campaign to register voters — many of whom had never voted in their lives — accelerated.

It may have been still possible for the regime to interrupt the process if it so wished, but the political cost of this action would have been too high. The bureaucratic wheels of the authoritarian system had begun to turn and it was not clear whether there would be unanimous support in the security forces for the use of dirty tricks. Moreover, Pinochet and his advisers in the Intelligence Central and the General Staff remained convinced of their victory by looking at the "objective" structural parameters.

In August 1988, the regime announced what had been widely rumored: that the plebiscite to extend the "mandate" of the General would be called within ninety days. The public was saturated with "news" of Pinochet touring the country and dispensing "gifts." At the end of that month, in an equally anticlimactic procedure, he was declared to be the official candidate of the Armed Forces.

How the vote went

Needless to say, the contest was not a true election, since all voters were asked to do was to choose between Pinochet or "chaos." Moreover, the regime was playing with a deck of cards clearly stacked in its favor. The "No" forces were allowed to run

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