

Chilean plebiscite: exit Pinochet?

by J. Nef and Remonda Bensabat

On October 5, 1988, after a brief campaign, nearly 7.5 million Chileans voted in a referendum called by General Augusto Pinochet and intended to extend his rule for eight more years. It was not the first time that Chileans had been called to the ballot box in the 15-year dictatorship. They had done so in two non-competitive and manifestly rigged "consultations," the first in 1978 to declare their loyalty for the regime, and again in 1980 to ratify the authoritarian Constitution. In both cases, by hook or by crook, Pinochet had managed to keep the upper hand.

The political and psychological circumstances of this new "consultation," however, were quite different from those of the previous occasions. So was its outcome: the regime lost by a margin of 55 to 43 percent and, despite speculations to the contrary, it had to concede defeat. For one thing, unlike 1978 and 1980, there were rules. True, these had been laid down in an arbitrary way in the 1980 Constitution, but they were binding rules nevertheless. The electoral registry, destroyed by the military after the coup of 1973, had been reconstituted through massive enumeration. Electoral registration was resisted at first by the bulk of the opposition as a ploy to give Pinochet an aura of legitimacy. By mid-year, actively promoted by all kinds of civic and political movements opposed to the dictatorship, it gained incredible momentum. More than 61 percent of the total population, or over 95 percent of all eligible voters, were registered. This was a far greater proportion than in any election in the country's democratic history, much higher than in most advanced Western democracies and far beyond what the General's supporters expected.

Opposition emerges

Political party activity had re-emerged after years of forced recess and persecution. The same was true of union and grassroots mobilization. Since 1983, massive demonstrations had begun to challenge the regime's resort to "authorized" terror. Not only did the opposition lose fear, but simultaneously, as political activity grew in "density," Pinochet himself ceased to have an absolute monopoly in taking the initiative. No more could he easily use "tactical surprise" to emerge victorious and outmaneuver the "enemy." His personalistic and megalomaniac style had alienated many of his allies. Disagreements with General Fernando Matthei, head of the Air Force, as well as with General Rodolfo Stange of the paramilitary police, the Carabineros, had surfaced earlier in the year. Similarly, a grow-

ing distance between the major economic conglomerates and the ailing dictator had become apparent. These inner conflicts did not amount to a crisis for the regime. The major fractions of the "power bloc" — big business and the security apparatus — remained united in their support of the neoliberal economic model and of the tutelary role of the armed forces. What was being questioned, albeit obliquely, was Pinochet's personal leadership.

This malaise had been enhanced by an increasingly antagonistic international environment. The Reagan administration, especially the State Department, for many years a supporter of the dictatorship, had gone sour on the Chilean military and had joined the new democracies in the region in denouncing human rights violations. This represented a victory for Washington's "Trilateralist" business faction in both parties (and its associates at home and abroad). The "losers," in the wake of the "Irangate" scandal, were the equally bipartisan ultranationalist "Pentagonists" and their national and international linkages. As a new strategy of redemocratization unfolded within US economic and intellectual circles, the National Security Doctrine of the 1970s lost its reputed effectiveness for both containment and stability. Instead, restricted democracy with structural adjustment, ruled by a centrist or left-of-center government appeared as a preferable solution to the region's crisis. In this context, the General had become not only an embarrassment to Chile's former friends but a serious liability for a new hemispheric policy.

Pinochet's declining fortunes

Besides these "objective" factors, there were psychological and attitudinal circumstances at work that had the long range and cumulative effect of eroding Pinochet's aura of credibility and invincibility. After the alleged attempt on his life in September 1986 and the discovery of a cache of arms, the regime went on the offensive. The state of siege was re-imposed and a return to official terror became noticeable. Although at first the opposition was shaken and largely ran for cover, the *atentado*, whether real or fancied, had the unexpected effect of making Pinochet look vulnerable. The Carmen Gloria Quintana incident, in which two young students were doused in gasoline by a military patrol and subsequently set afire, aroused public opinion. Quintana, who survived the ordeal with horrible scars, became a living testimony of the regime's darker side. The Pope's visit in 1987, which gave common people the first opportunity in fourteen years to demonstrate freely against abuse, was a boost for public morale. The suppression of the same demonstrations by tear gas, truncheons and water cannon added to the series of blunders in front of the international press.

J. Nef is Professor of Political Studies and International Development at the University of Guelph.
Remonda Bensabat is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Toronto.