Chile, human rights and Canada

by Michael Tutton

Chile's military government has been in power for thirteen years, but the mess of economic crisis and institutionalized repression it has created are heading to a critical crossroads. One route leads to a renewal of that nation's democratic tradition and the gradual healing of the wounds opened during totalitarian rule. But the other equally likely possibility is the rise of a violent revolutionary movement that would end in either a marxist government or an even more oppressive military regime.

To date Canadian policy-makers have indicated little understanding of the crucial stage Chilean history is approaching. The first lesson is the most important: Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew socialist president Salvador Allende in 1973, is determined to retain power, and unless he is forced out soon the country will likely reach the second, undemocratic destiny. Pinochet has practical reasons for not giving up power — he truly believes that the solution to communism is to keep a firm lid on individual liberties (such as the right to vote); he also knows his own personal survival depends on keeping office. Families of the 10,000 to 35,000 people estimated by the Chilean Commission of Human Rights to have died in the concentration camps and soccer stadiums in the years following the coup, victims of torture by the secret police, relatives of the "disappeared" and the thousands of political exiles are not going to quickly forgive and forget. Pinochet is aware of the human rights trials which Argentinian military leaders were subjected to following their descent from power, and he does not wish a similar fate for himself. Thus heed should be paid to men like Genaro Arriagada, the director of Radio Cooperativa, an opposition radio station, who told me during an interview, "Chile's case is distinct from other countries [that have recently thrown out dictators]. We aren't facing a palace guard like Somoza's [former Nicaraguan dictator] or an army like the Philippines which will change its loyalty. We are in the presence of a military dictator who is tremendously tough."

Canada's record

If the Canadian government proceeded from an awareness of such fundamentals of Chilean politics it would quickly realize that action is needed soon. To date most of the criticism of the dictatorship has been strong on condemnations and light on sanctions that would cause serious damage to Pinochet's power. One example of the Canadian attitude: after Rodrigo Rojas de Negri, age 19, was set on fire by a military patrol during a national strike organized by the opposition, the Canadian government expressed outrage and dispatched an embassy official to the Rojas funeral. That was quite right, but only one day before the national strike, a 2-page spread had appeared in the pro-government newspaper *El Mercurio*, celebrating Canada Day and announcing proudly that Chilean exports to Canada were on the rise. The feature included a photo of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, provided by the Canadian embassy, and advertisements paid for by Canadian multinationals such as shoe manufacturer Bata Ltd.

There have been other incidents of inconsistent Canadian attitudes. Canada has admitted thousands of Chilean political refugees, including Carmen Quintana, who was set on fire in the same incident as Rojas. (Quintana, age 18, came to Canada with her family in September this year and is undergoing treatment at the Hotel Dieu hospital burn unit in Montreal.) Yet, even as Quintana was entering the country, a Canadian Press report revealed that the federal government had allowed arms merchants to sell about seven million dollars worth of military goods to Chile. The export permits were issued from September 1984, until March 1986, and included riot equipment, radar equipment and tank and helicopter parts. Having personally experienced the furious efficiency of the Chilean riot police, who do not hesitate to hose down and tear-gas the foreign press, I was particularly saddened to read this news upon my return to Canada.

Canada's opportunity

To determine how Canada might change course in order to help Chile return to democracy, one should first examine some of the cracks now appearing in the Pinochet fortress. The general may be tough and audacious, but he is not invulnerable. The 1980 constitution he designed requires a plebiscite on a presidential candidate the junta will nominate in 1989. If the public votes against the military candidate the constitution requires a return to democracy and open presidential elections within a year. Polls indicate Pinochet would almost certainly lose if he ran as the junta candidate in 1989. In fact, there is some doubt the junta will even nominate him. So Pinochet is searching for a way out of this self-constructed constitutional trap. Mark Falcoff

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