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The Meaning behind Protests in Chile

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By Victor Figueroa-Clark

There is an old Chilean saying that “no evil lasts a hundred years, and there’s no Christian that could stand it.” The recent protests that have spread across the country mark the end of people’s patience with the ‘evil’ that the Pinochet-era constitution and social structure represented for many. For the [last week Chile has seen the most significant mass protests](#) since the end of the dictatorship in 1990. For the first time in years, people have built barricades in Santiago and other cities and have participated in ‘cacerolazos’ – the coordinated banging of pots and pans and beeping of car horns as a sign of protest that were a hallmark of the struggle against the dictatorship. Even the chants of the demonstrators recalled earlier times (although slightly modified). Not so the behaviour of the police, which used Pinochet-era legislation to repress the demonstrators with [tear gas, water cannon and beatings](#). Over 800 people have been arrested.

The government has offered what the vice-president of the [Students’ Federation](#), Francisco Figueroa, has called “aspirins and sticking plasters” whilst refusing to consider the students’ real demands for an end to profiteering from education. The reason the government cannot offer more is an issue that goes to the heart of the Chilean system. To change the education system would mean changing the [Constitution](#) imposed by Pinochet in 1981 and endorsed by the post-1990 governments. It would mean changing the neoliberal economic model and abandoning the brutal rationale behind it. The current government, a right-wing coalition of former dictatorship stooges and businessmen first made wealthy by the corrupt privatisation of Chile’s wealth under Pinochet, and by the existence of a savagely repressive labour code, is unwilling to entertain making the necessary changes. As Carlos Larrain, the leader of President Pinera’s National Renovation Party said, “we will not allow our arm to be twisted by a load of useless subversives.”



The [education model](#) in Chile is similar in some respects to the one the British Conservative government wishes to introduce in the UK. Schools are funded by local government, and therefore most children go to schools where the quality of education depends the income of the surrounding area. Central investment in the public education system is negligible and quality of schooling varies enormously. Teachers are low paid and the system largely survives on the enthusiasm and dedication of the staff. Those that can afford it, among them a large section of the middle class, send their children to private schools where conditions are better, but are often forced into debt to do so.

At [university level](#) things are even worse. The proliferation of private universities with little quality control after Pinochet’s education laws has led to the growth of a large number of poor-quality establishments, and huge disparities between the top universities and the rest. Expensive fees mean most students must go into debt to study. It is a system geared to the law of the jungle in which the wealthy thrive and the rest subsist. The beneficiaries of the education system are the owners of the universities. Many of them are in the current government, or are linked to it, which to an extent explains their reluctance to reform the system.

However, Chile has witnessed widespread student protests before, notably in the [2006 ‘Penguin revolution.’](#) To understand why the current mobilisations are different it is necessary to look at a series of related issues, which all have their origin in the dark years of the dictatorship.

It was the dictatorship which imposed an economic model where competition and the market ruled in all aspects of life. Having [overthrown the socialist government of Salvador Allende in 1973](#), it set about creating a new Chile, one which would be free of the faults of the old system which had allowed a Marxist to come to power. This new Chile was enshrined in a [new Constitution ratified in 1981](#). The main features of which were a highly undemocratic electoral system (ironically modelled on the British one) which was designed to exclude the left, and an economic system characterised by mass privatisations, a hamstrung labour movement, an emphasis on exports, and the opening up of the copper mines to foreign ownership. In the words of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral “whoever owns copper [in Chile] owns politics”: after 1983 Chilean ownership of the mines was shared with foreign companies. This was combined with no royalty and low taxes to create a veritable bonanza for foreign mining companies.

The engine of the Chilean economy is copper. Prior to 1971 it was driven by taxes on foreign copper companies, and afterwards by contributions from the state-owned copper company, Codelco. To understand the [importance of copper to Chile](#),

last year the value of copper extracted was over \$39 billion. Chile has a population of just over 16 million, enough to give every Chilean about \$2 million. President Pinera has made much of Chile's average wage of nearly \$15,000 USD, but this figure is heavily distorted by the richest few. [According to recent research by one Chilean academic, 60% of Chileans have the same income level as the average Angolan.](#)

It is this maths that is driving the protest movement. Discontent with education is the tip of an iceberg of frustration with a system that was initially imposed by force, and was maintained for years by a combination of fear of the military's return, consumerism driven by debt, and government subsidies of the poorest. The 2006 mobilisations were the first sign that the Chilean people was losing its patience with the legacy of the dictatorship, and with those that administered it.

Today none of the main political parties has much support, and none has any influence on the protest movement – 57% of Chileans support neither the government nor the main opposition. The absence of support for the mobilisations from former leaders of the [Concertacion coalition](#) which governed Chile from 1990-2010 has been notable. This mobilisation is beyond party politics because it is a rejection of the system as a whole. Students are now working to develop a comprehensive proposal to end the market in education, and are calling for a plebiscite on a new constitution, something that the left in Chile has been calling for since 1981. As the students' leadership is saying, today either you are with the proposal to build a new system "or you are with the right and the legacy of the dictatorship."

The signs are there that people are listening. Unlike 2006, the current mobilisations include people from outside the education sector. Furthermore, they follow a wave of other protests. [Copper](#) and [port workers](#) have been on strike. In the South the [city of Punta Arenas was paralysed for weeks by mobilisations protesting the price of gas](#). Indigenous Mapuche political prisoners have been on hunger strike protesting at anti-terror laws used to victimise them. Thousands have demonstrated against energy and mining projects that threaten the environment. To cap it all the CUT trade union congress has called a national strike for the 24th and 25th of this month, demanding structural changes to economy and society.

What is being witnessed today in Chile is the beginning of the end for Pinochet's system of a limited democracy and a neoliberal economic system. The former has been unable to keep up with social and economic changes, and the latter has not delivered growth with social justice. What will come next is anyone's guess, but sources in Chile indicate that the students and others are looking towards the examples of Iceland (for its constituent assembly), Brazil (for the way the Brazil has developed and the PT took power) and the Scandinavian countries for their social democracy with well funded welfare state. Although others look towards Venezuela and the older generation back at Chile's own experiment with socialism under Salvador Allende.

What is certain is that the unrest has the potential to bring down the government, and will certainly help to create a coalition to defeat it at the next elections. If this occurs the effects will be felt far beyond Chile – the neoliberal poster child in Latin America. Colombia and Mexico have both followed a similar political and economic path, with serious consequences for their social cohesion. If Chile, the most successful of the 'neoliberal' countries of the region, turns away from limited representative democracy and free markets, it will vastly strengthen the hand of those opposing a similar set of policies elsewhere.

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