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The Challenge for Chile and the World



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SANTIAGO, Chile.

In October, a rise in Santiago's metro fares set off the biggest protests in Chile since the end of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Protesters were calling out elite corruption, inequality, high prices and low wages, and specifically the pain caused by a privatized retirement system, which left many old people in grinding poverty.

The essential question that confronts Chile is one that many other nations are grappling with today: Can the demands of a radicalized and disaffected movement of citizens, most of whom are young, impatient and social media-savvy, be channeled and resolved by a

political elite that has shown itself, until now, blind to the needs of the great majority of its populace?

The approval ratings of President Sebastián Piñera of Chile, who leads a right-wing government, have sunk to six percent while those of the Chilean Congress, which is controlled by the center-left-wing opposition, have fallen to three percent.

Whether Chile will succeed in meeting the challenges of a restless, dissatisfied citizenry depends, in great measure, on the decisions of someone like Pablo Z., a 43-year-old father of four, whom I met a few days ago at the Plaza Italia, the epicenter of the uprising. Ever since the revolt demolished the certainties of Chile's exceptionalism as an oasis of neoliberal success in the Latin America, he has been living two parallel lives.

By day, he works diligently at a construction job, building one of the many expensive high rises that are sprouting all over Santiago.

In the evenings and often until dawn, he covers his features with a bandanna and battles the police alongside thousands of activists whose tactics have often turned violent and destructive — many times in response to the extraordinary police brutality of the past three months, which includes beatings, rapes in police stations and toxic material in water cannons. It is a level of violence not seen since the Pinochet era.

The rebellion, backed by millions of Chileans who have flooded the streets, derives from a deep frustration with the neoliberal economic model of development that has dominated the country's existence for almost five decades and that has not delivered the promised prosperity and equal opportunities.

Thus far, the protests have succeeded in ways that would have seemed impossible to even contemplate three months ago. Modifications to the inadequate and unfair health and educational systems and to the failing pension plans (privatized during the Pinochet dictatorship, 1973-1990) are underway, although still insufficient to quell the unrest.

And the right-wing political parties that had always adamantly defended Pinochet's fraudulent Constitution of 1980, under which they had been able to veto any major changes, joined the parties of the center-left to propose an itinerary for a constitutional convention that will, by the end of April, begin creating a new and participatory Magna Carta born of the free will of the people.

What matters most, perhaps, is that the country no longer thinks of itself as an "oasis" in a turbulent Latin America (in the words of the clueless President Sebastián Piñera) but

rather as part of the continent's perpetual struggle for justice and equality. A new Chile seems to have been born.

Despite these advances, which prove that the political elite of Chile have started to listen to the neglected majorities they are supposed to represent, it is not enough for Pablo Z. and his leaderless comrades. He showed me four pellet wounds in his upper torso — and said he had been lucky, because many activists (almost 300) had lost some vision because the police deliberately targeted their eyes. Others had been beaten and raped in police stations.

Pablo Z. demands that those responsible for these systematic violations of human rights be put on trial and wants the rampant corruption in the highest places — far too often protected by a system rigged to benefit the obscenely rich — be penalized. He and his comrades, meanwhile, live on indecent salaries.

Violence, he argues, will not cease until these demands, including the resignation of the government, be met. He shrugs off the burning of churches, the interruption of university entrance exams, the barricades in the streets, as inevitable when trying to awaken the country to flagrant inequities, shatter its complacency and restore dignity.

Protesters repeatedly speak of dignity and have even renamed some places in Santiago “Dignidad.”

“We accomplished in 30 days what nobody did in 30 years,” Pablo told me. “As soon as we stop protesting, the people at the top will ignore us again. Why should we stop now?”

There are reasons, though, why the protesters might wish to rethink their tactics. Delinquents and narcos have taken advantage of the everlasting clashes to vandalize and loot. Conservative forces are using the resulting chaos, dread and interruption of normal life to emphasize law and order as the most important issue of the day instead of the urgent questioning of the economic and political model.

Sections of the Chilean right, nostalgic for the Pinochet years, have already begun backtracking from the need for a new constitution and are sponsoring harsh repressive measures against the rights of assembly and free speech.

This does not matter to Pablo Z. Suspicious of traditional politicians, he dreams of a total revolution, a cause for which he says he is prepared to die.

Can someone as alienated from the system as Pablo ever be part of a social consensus without which it will be impossible to change the laws of the land? Is there a chance he will ever inhabit a country where he will not be divided between his daytime job as a builder and his nighttime struggles as a destroyer of “oppressive” institutions? Without incessant pressure from below, can structural change ever be achieved? But if the situation gets out of hand, will the armed forces end up intervening to restore “order”?

It remains to be seen if Chile will be able, in the stressful months ahead, to meet the social, economic and political challenges posed by the revolt.

If the mainly peaceful Chilean people do manage such a seemingly intractable task — bridging the abyss between recalcitrant protesters and a fearful elite clinging to power — this deepening of democracy might show other nations a way to deal with similar divisions.

It is something to aim for in these dire times of worldwide conflict and resistance. A popular victory that, I hope, Pablo Z. could eventually recognize as his own and embrace as a way forward.

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