

Chile 1973 – The Original 9/11

Thursday 7 September 2023, by [MENDOZA Oscar](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2023).

AS THE DATE nears when we'll be marking half a century since the overthrow of the Salvador Allende government in Chile on September 11th, I'm taken back to that gray drizzly day when the future we had dreamt of disappeared in a wave of violence, death and repression. Fifty years on from the coup, does Allende's dream live on?

Contents

- [Early Success](#)
- [Destabilization](#)
- [Escalating Crisis](#)
- [Coup, Martial Law, Mass Murder](#)
- [Commemoration and the Future](#)
- [Celebrate International \(...\)](#)

For me, the carefree days of youth came to an abrupt halt just over two weeks later to be followed by detention, torture and imprisonment, which ended only with expulsion and exile to Scotland in May 1975.

Allende's narrow victory in the presidential election of 4 September 1970, at the head of a multi-party center-left coalition, placed the undisputed leader of Chile's progressive forces in charge of the executive branch on the basis of a radical program of structural change.

His "Chilean way to socialism," which put the emphasis on democratic, pluralist and institutional means to achieve the profound economic and social transformations working people demanded, gave rise to the expression of a peaceful revolution that tasted of "empanadas and red wine." Chile would not be a new Cuba; it wouldn't follow any blueprint but rather make its own, based on our country's history and republican traditions.

As the first-ever Marxist democratically elected president, Allende's election created significant interest worldwide and became a beacon of hope for progressive forces everywhere. His own long political career, which included stints as a government minister and member of both the lower and upper houses of Congress, brought about early support from European social democrats and many others.



Salvador Allende articulated the hopes of Chileans for social transformation and justice.

The hope that Chile could deliver fundamental changes via the ballot box whilst charting its own

path was also warmly received by the non-aligned movement in the midst of a rampant Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The joyful feelings that Allende's triumph unleashed among working people, urban and rural trade unions, artists and intellectuals, and the young contrasted greatly with the universally hostile reaction from industrialists, landowners, professional and trade associations.

The latter had expected former right wing President Jorge Alessandri to win on 4 September 1970, and their initial surprise and dismay soon gave way to outright antagonism and fierce opposition.

On the other hand, the US administration under Richard Nixon, with Henry Kissinger in the State Department, was conspiring with Chileans opposed to Allende even before he took up his post. [1]

Before Allende's confirmation by Congress, a requisite step because he hadn't achieved an absolute majority of the popular vote, a botched kidnap attempt by an extreme right squad financed by the CIA resulted in the killing of the head of the army, General Rene Schneider.

Widely seen as a supporter of the constitution, Schneider embraced the concept of the military staying out of politics, and was seen by Allende opponents as a major obstacle to their plans to prevent him from taking over from outgoing president Eduardo Frei. As he lay mortally wounded in the military hospital, Congress confirmed Allende by a large majority.

Early Success

Those Chileans enthused by the incoming Popular Unity administration put their faith in Allende's hands and in the first 40 measures set out in his program of government. The perception of widespread international solidarity for the construction of the new Chile also contributed to a strong feeling of energy and optimism.

As an initially conservative, religious, privately educated middle class teen, I experienced a damascene sort of conversion during 1971 when purely by chance I met and befriended one of Allende's private secretary's sons. At the same time, having enrolled at university in Santiago that March, I went to live with my older married sister whose husband was a committed member of Allende's socialist party and active at a high level of the party's internal structure.

Both those events in my life triggered my move towards the political left and what would become my lifelong Allendismo. Having enjoyed the privilege of spending social time, mostly on weekends at the El Canaveral home of my friend's mother, with Allende and his closest circle, I developed a deep affection for the man as well as a growing admiration and respect for the political leader.

I cherish those memories, which are both reminders of days of great happiness and hope, and of deep sorrow and loss.

Of those measures with the greatest impact, both on supporters and detractors of Allende's government, it's worth highlighting the extension and acceleration of the agrarian reform program, initiated under Frei, which addressed the inefficient and non-productive latifundia system; the wholesale nationalization of U.S.-owned large-scale copper mines, the largest source of export income for the country; the expropriation and incorporation into the state-managed sector of unproductive factories across various areas of economic activity, with strong workers' participation; and the free distribution of a liter of milk (in the form of powder milk) to over three million children under 15 and lactating mothers, which made a significant impact on malnutrition levels and acted as a role model for others in the region.

Destabilization

The copper nationalization, which was approved unanimously by Congress in July 1971, became a major area of conflict with the U.S. administration and led to it orchestrating an economic siege of the Chilean economy. As Nixon put it, "I want the Chilean economy to squeal."

Deprived not only of U.S. aid but also of international loans and credits through U.S. pressure on multinational bodies, what could be deemed as a successful first year for Allende, fuelled by an expansionary fiscal policy that produced high levels of growth and employment, turned into a developing and growing economic, social and political crisis by the start of 1972.

A hitherto phenomenon only known to the poor, the inability to purchase basic goods, became a daily life challenge for most of the country as wholesale distributors and retail outlets started hoarding and limiting access to them, provoking long queues and rationing and widespread social discontent. Black market speculation, and profiteering, made things even worse.

As 1972 progressed, Chile turned increasingly polarized and U.S. foreign interference funded a wide range of opposition parties and groups. This led to an absolute absence of dialogue and the level of disruption caused by demonstrations and counterdemonstrations prevented ordinary people from carrying on with their daily lives on a regular basis.

The first worrying sign of the instability in the country was a national strike by road transport owners during October 1972, which paralyzed the country and made already scarce goods disappear from the stores. Allende's firm hand against this seditious movement, detaining the strike leaders, made matters worse and retail, industry, professional and opposition student associations joined the strike, bringing Chile to a virtual halt.

At the same time, extreme right groups carried out terrorist attacks on national infrastructure. The end of the strikes was only secured on November 5th, when Allende appointed senior members of the armed forces to his cabinet, including the head of the army, General Carlos Prats, as interior minister.

Escalating Crisis

Things calmed down for a while and the summer recess was then focused on the upcoming parliamentary elections due in March 1973. The now united opposition of Frei's Christian democrats and right wing parties formed an electoral pact (CODE or Confederation for Democracy), in the hope of securing a two-thirds majority in Congress in order to impeach and depose Allende, and call for fresh presidential elections.

Confounding all expectations, Allende's Popular Unity coalition increased its share of the vote from 36% in 1970 to almost 44%, cancelling the idea that the president could be impeached and deposed by legal means whilst significantly strengthening the socialist and communist representation in Congress.

Armed forces members left the cabinet at this point. The reaction from the opposition and the U.S. administration was shock and bewilderment at first, unable to understand how in the midst of the serious economic and political crisis the government forces had increased their support.

Soon after, though, the determination to depose Allende centered on plans for a coup d'état. The dress rehearsal came three months later with the tank regiment putsch of 29 June, in what would be

called the “Tancozo.” Decisive leadership by Allende and the top brass loyal to the constitution and the law brought the insurrection to an end rapidly and with few casualties.

The signs were clear, however, and opposition politicians continued to openly call for a coup. The atmosphere of tension within government circles and in the Popular Unity parties, trade unions and other progressive forces was palpable and became more acute as the opposition majority in Congress pursued its campaign to declare Allende’s government as unconstitutional.

At the same time, pro-coup army generals used their wives to demonstrate against general Prats, whom they saw as the major obstacle to a coup, and forced his resignation as head of the army at the end of August. Allende appointed general Pinochet, viewed as a loyalist, to replace Prats and the rest is history.

Coup, Martial Law, Mass Murder

As Allende prepared to deliver a speech calling for a referendum to overcome the political crisis in a democratic manner, in which he would have expressed his willingness to step down if defeated at the ballot box, the military struck on the date chosen for the presidential announcement, September 11th 1973.

Although the coup was no surprise, the sheer brutality of the military overthrow of Allende’s democratic government was hard to comprehend at first. The Moneda palace was burnt out after the air force bombardment. Allende was dead, and dozens of his close advisers, ministers, political leaders and his personal guard (the GAP), who had remained by his side, would be detained, many brutally tortured and murdered in the following days.

Martial law, including an overnight curfew, was imposed and Congress was disbanded. In the following days and months, thousands would be detained whilst others sought asylum in foreign embassies. Freedom of speech, of the press and of association were canceled. All of this went ahead with the tacit complicity of the judiciary, predominantly staffed by anti-Allende judges.

Just over two weeks after the coup, and having learnt that my best friend had been executed, I was detained whilst visiting my family. A long time later, I would discover that the order for my detention had been given by General Sergio Arellano Stark during his short stop in Curicó as part of the “caravan of death.” [2]

Following secret military detention, I was eventually taken to the national football stadium which acted as the largest detention center in the country, where I spent a month before being transferred to the Penitentiary of Santiago. Much later and having endured a military “war tribunal,” I was exiled and arrived in Scotland as a political refugee in May 1975.

Commemoration and the Future

As we near the day of the 50th anniversary, I believe that we should ask ourselves two questions: first, what are we commemorating? And, second, does Allende’s dream of a fairer and better Chile live on today?

For me, the commemorations must center first and foremost on the figure of Allende and the achievements of the Popular Unity government. Internationally, and in keeping with the strong support his government enjoyed at the time, the figure of the martyred president is held in high

esteem and his name adorns a large number of squares, avenues, streets and public buildings across all continents.

In an era when political leaders can be reviled and popular trust in politics is at an all-time low, it's fitting that a man whose political career was an example of democratic and personal integrity, and who was faithful to his promise to fulfill the program of government he was elected on, should be remembered.

For working people in Chile, including those past working age who cannot afford to retire on the meager pensions, and all those struggling to achieve gender equality, a clean and sustainable environment, indigenous peoples' rights, and other progressive causes, Allende offers a role model of consistency, hard work and perseverance in pursuit of a better future. Allende vive!

If we consider only the nationalization of large-scale copper mining in July 1971, the Popular Unity government's legacy to Chile has been immeasurable. The huge revenues derived since to the Chilean state have enabled the country to make significant strides towards development, a development that is only hampered by the neoliberal economic arrangements imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship with fire and blood, which Chileans have struggled to overcome ever since.

Furthermore, the success of the state copper corporation CODELCO offers a blueprint for the exploitation and management of Chile's large deposits of lithium, essential to the modern global economy, and for the anticipated large revenues to fuel further development.

The egalitarian ethos underpinning the Popular Unity government and its programmatic focus on the poorest and most vulnerable are very much needed today, when an acutely unequal and segregated Chile is riven by social conflict.

Naturally, and I think most importantly for those of us who were deeply affected by the brutal repression that the dictatorship unleashed on our country, the 50th anniversary offers a unique opportunity to remember the thousands of Chileans who endured detention and torture, often followed by exile, and for those killed and disappeared by the military. To the fallen, honor and glory!

It's also a chance to salute the courage, integrity and resilience of the relatives and friends who for five decades have campaigned to discover the truth and to achieve a measure of justice. Their sacrifices and tenacity are an example to us all. Standing shoulder to shoulder with them we affirm: nothing and nobody is forgotten!

Celebrate International Solidarity

Especially for those of us who were exiled, this date gives us the opportunity to celebrate international solidarity and to express our thanks and appreciation to peoples across the world who welcomed us and offered us their friendship.

In many cases, their generosity of spirit helped us to heal our broken lives and build happy and fulfilled futures in their midst. To them, we express our eternal gratitude.

Those countless examples of solidarity with Chilean refugees in particular, and with the struggle to restore democracy to our homeland more generally, gain special relevance today when large numbers of people from a range of countries and regions flee wars, persecution and oppression. Asylum is a right and we all have a duty to extend them the hand of friendship in their hour of need.

Our common humanity demands it.

And, perhaps more importantly, because a growing chorus of prominent extreme right political figures in Chile are openly justifying the military coup, it's essential to recall and relay the facts.

While deniers, for example, try to separate the human rights abuses and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the dictatorship from the actual overthrow of Allende's government, arguing that the latter was "necessary" and "welcomed" in the face of the critical situation in 1973, it's our duty to state clearly and unequivocally that the coup itself and the following horror were one and the same. And nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies the military's actions.

As current president Gabriel Boric puts it, the political challenges and conflicts can only be resolved with more democracy, not less. Stability and social progress demand dialogue and compromise, in order to serve the best interests of the country.

Allende's example for the generations that have followed serves as an inspiration for current efforts by the progressive Boric government in Chile: in relation to the central role of the state in the management of the vast lithium deposits and the recently approved royalty tax for large scale mining; in respect of proposals for wider tax reform to fund significant improvements to pensions, health and education; in international cooperation both within Latin America and more widely, as exemplified by the wide-ranging trade agreement reached with the European Union at the end of 2022; also in environmental, human rights, scientific cooperation, arts and culture; in major infrastructure and housing.

Like Allende then, Boric faces relentless opposition by economic interests foreign and domestic, and the rightwing parties that emerged as the support base for the dictatorship and act as apologists for the coup. Nevertheless, we can conclude with confidence by affirming that fifty years on Allende's dream — a future where others would follow his example of dignity and faithful service to the people and build a more just and fair society - lives on.

In his final speech, broadcast by radio Magallanes shortly before the bombing of the presidential palace started, Allende told us that the quiet metal of his voice might be extinguished but that we would feel his presence always.

Given the huge number of commemorative events, many of them focused on the figure of Allende, ranging from films, plays, exhibitions, seminars and discussion fora, art works, concerts, rallies, processions and so on, both in Chile and across the world, we can be left in no doubt that Allende lives on as do his dreams for a better Chile.

Like him, let's all progressives have faith in Chile and its people. We shall overcome/Venceremos!

Oscar Mendoza

P.S.

• Against the Current No. 226, September/October 2023:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc226/chile1973-the-original-9-11/>

Footnotes

[1] The best and most comprehensive account of U.S. intervention in the overthrow of Allende can be found in Peter Kornbluth's *The Pinochet File*, published by The New Press in 2003.

[2] See "Sergio Arellano Stark, driver of the 'Caravan of Death' under Pinochet, dies at 94," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2016.