

The Doomed Path to Socialism: Conditions Preceding Chile's Democratic Failure in 1973

Jasleen Johal

Introduction

Over the course of the 19th century, the continent of Latin America saw numerous fledgling governments undertake their first political experiments in the post-colonial era. From this point on, the region became progressively characterized by political instability and contradictions within the socio-economic structure of many Latin American countries; it is in this context that the case of Chile is of particular interest, as it enjoyed a period of stability within the political and social realms that was almost unheard of in the Southern Cone between the early 19th and mid-20th centuries.

Given Chile's relative stability and democratic past, the failure of democracy in 1973 may seem to be a discontinuity in its history; however, the collapse of the democratic regime was in fact a direct result of the long-standing tradition of oligarchic democracy in Chile, which fell into jeopardy when it could not adapt to the reforms of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. This paper will seek to prove this by first comparing Chile historically against a social and political background in order to determine the conditions that contributed to the military coup in 1973, with particular emphasis on the role of the elites in shaping the oligarchic democracy. After determining the historical conditions of democracy, it is critical to then examine the role of the Popular Unity government in ushering in change, as well as the organic crisis which emerged following this transition; finally, in addition to the proposed cause for democratic failure, an alternative view portraying this collapse as a hiccup produced by the discontinuity of Allende's reforms will be explored.

The Historical Foundations of Chilean Democracy, Pre-1973

While the failure of Chilean Democracy in 1973 may appear incongruous with its stable past, a closer analysis of the basis and distinguishing factors for democratic success in the nation reveal that this long tradition of democracy was also the biggest impediment to change. In reality, the central feature of the nation's stability lay in the prevalence of the semi-feudal paradigm, which negated the social question of land reform and sustained a compromise between the rural and urban elites.

From the beginning, Chile has demonstrated a proclivity for oligarchic and dictatorial regimes, dominated by elite interests and heavily mediated by the military (BBC 2011). Because of the overwhelming presence of the elites since its naissance, Chile's social, political, and economic realms were structured in a manner which subjugated the vast majority of the population in order to better serve the few (Chossudovsky 1960). This hierarchal matrix is most visible in the preconditions surrounding the problematic "social question"; specifically, it underpins the semi-feudal agrarian framework which persisted as a postcolonial vestige of former institutions and power relations. Through this system, not only was the question of land reform suppressed, but the rural oligarchs maintained absolute domination over the politically immobile peasantry (1960). Furthermore, the interaction between the landed oligarchs and the farmers reflected the nature of relations between the elites and the workers on several different levels, such as the purchase of political legitimacy in a process known as clientelism. Like the vassalage of farmers through the elite ownership and operation of *latifundia*, or large landed estates, clientelism illustrates the dependent relationship of the elites and the lower strata, where the former relied on votes of support in exchange for favours and small concessions. Although this lord-vassal matrix stunted the social and political progress of the nation, it was precisely for this reason that, for the period between the mid-1930s to the late 1960s, the military abstained from major intervention in the political sphere—if dissent was repressed or otherwise absent, then the status quo remained uncontested and the Chilean armed forces had no reason to restore order (Loveman 130).

While the voice of the worker and peasant classes was stifled and their socio-political impotence reinforced by the existing hierarchy, another threat to Chile's stability was the contentious nature of the privileged classes. The origin of the elites themselves is rooted in a dichotomy which defines the very country: the traditional, conservative, land-owning rural oligarchs, in parallel to the more progressive, neoliberal, industrial urban elites. While the former's power was derived from the country's colonial past, from whence many of the semi-feudal policies and agrarian practices survived, the latter built a capitalistic hierarchy that ultimately produced the proletariat and robust Chilean middle-class. In keeping with the inherent contradictions embedded in these two groups and their differing approaches to nation-building, it is evident that political stability was not a result of conflicting interests, but of a

compromise between the two factions. In addition to the strategic intermarriage between elite families, both the landed oligarchy and the urban elites “recognized a common interests in preserving an economic order that brought them prosperity” (Lewis 76) and so they entered a mutually beneficial union. The resulting bipartisan historic bloc maximized the power of the elites while reducing the threat to incumbent power by appeasing both sides. This power structure entailed “an exclusionary, nonmobilizational formal democracy that impeded radical reforms” (Loveman 130), where heavy regulations and policing were enforced to ensure that Chilean politics were maintained to support the historical bloc, while still providing a façade of democratic openness.

Though not a true democracy, this inter-elite compromise ensured a stable oligarchic democracy comprised of free but not fair elections, where suffrage was restricted to exclude the vast majority of the citizenry, and political parties consisted solely of elites. The manufacture of consent amidst the popular masses and maintenance of a hegemonic historic bloc precluded the need for militaristic intervention (130), and the provision of powers avoided an organic crisis. The apportioning of government reflected the aforementioned dichotomy, as the legislative branch was dominated by the landed oligarchy and the executive consisted largely of urban elites. Owing to this distribution of political power, the legislative and executive bias favoured the interests of the few, and largely excluded those of the popular masses (Lewis 77). Until the 1960s and ‘70s, this historic bloc, comprised exclusively of elites, served as a means for regulating and limiting the political voice of the large Chilean working and middle classes—the elections were carefully controlled and the outcome directed so that either the rural conservatives or the urban liberals would win, and both parties’ interests would be preserved (Loveman 84)—and effectively avoided the “social question” through the corroboration of the aforementioned clientelistic, semi-feudal agrarian system in the rural areas (Lewis 76). The cooperation between the upper class, as well as the overarching hegemony upheld by the historic bloc, were the greatest reasons for political stability, as “all elite groups in Chile recognized a common interest in preserving an economic order that brought them prosperity” (76). Consequently, all were equally motivated to compromise in order to deter any electoral success by parties like the Radical or Marxist groups.

Although this historic bloc dominated the political sphere for much of the period preceding the presidential victory of Salvador Allende, a similar challenge had previously presented itself in the early 1920s. The breakdown of inter-elite co-operation put Chilean democracy in crisis after Arturo Alessandri's reformist government ushered in constitutional change and sweeping labour reforms, providing greater influence to the labour unions and rural workers while reducing the power of church over state (BBC; Robles-Ortiz 520). After these policies began to stir unrest—notably amidst the farmers towards the landed oligarchs, which was consequently reflected amidst the conservative Congress against the Presidency—Minister of War Carlos Ibanez led the military in the 1927 coup that would restore order, albeit largely at the expense of the lower strata (Hudson; Loveman 84). This instance of authoritarianism and use of coercion to restore Chilean oligarchic democracy provides an excellent frame of reference when examining Allende's failed reforms decades later.

Salvador Allende and the Fundamental Changes in Chilean Governance

After exploring the basis of Chile's uninterrupted period of oligarchic democracy, another important aspect in determining what led to the breakdown of democracy in 1973 is the nature of the government in power during that turning point. In 1970, Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government was the first Marxist government to be elected in Chile (Lewis 197), and it set in motion the sweeping changes that would later result in a military coup. The circumstances and nature of social change under the UP is central because of its role as the final democratically elected government in a consistently stable political environment lasting four decades.

Before Allende's induction into the presidential seat in 1970, the general political atmosphere had shifted considerably since the failure of Alessandri's reformist government, and the growing contradictions generated by the duality of Chilean politics and its disarticulated development model paved the way for the weakening of the historic bloc. While the general public was still mainly excluded from the electoral process, a growing number of factions like the Marxist and Socialist parties began to emerge, representing the labour movement and both urban and rural workers. However, in spite of the fact that the inclusion of these parties appeared to be a democratic widening, one of the greatest contradictions of the

Chilean regime was that the state of oligarchic democracy itself required the deterrence and suppression of any real inclusionary liberal democratic principles (Smith 3), including free and fair elections for all citizens, as well as proper representation that encompasses equality of opportunity. To accomplish this, the hegemony of the historic bloc would have to be dissolved, and the nature of Chilean economics, which focused heavily on the exploitation of labour, would have to be revised to incorporate the workers as owners into the means of production, and the farmers as owners and allocators of their own land. In effect, this would lead to the dismantlement of the urban and rural elites, and the disempowerment of the armed forces, who received security and power from reinforcing the status quo of the historic bloc (3-4). For this reason, the appearance of democratic opening was in stark contrast with the narrow political reality, in which even the radical parties still adhered to the framework and rules of the elites. This compliancy also demonstrated how deeply the concept of Chilean rights and values were imbedded into civil society and its institutions (Gillespie 110).

With the exception the policies of Eduardo Frei, who led the Christian Democrats' attempts at garnering the squatter vote in the term immediately preceding Popular Unity (Posner 55), Allende was different from many of his predecessors in that he sought to resolve the long-standing contradictions within the economic, political and social spheres of Chile, by bringing greater focus to the plight of the working class and peasantry, as well as by increasing their mobility in what was dubbed a "peaceful parliamentary road to socialism" (Rai 2293). It was this paradoxical and self-destructive transformation of the lower classes that would lead to the organic crisis, aided by pressures from the United States and vested American corporations (Crow 814; Rai 2293), and enable the destruction of forty years of uninterrupted oligarchic democracy. Allende's policies and reforms dealt largely with increasing the mobilization of the previously marginalized working and peasant classes, but because the oligarchic institutions were not equipped to process this dissent, the threat of grassroots violence exacerbated the growing volatility of the Chilean state. Furthermore, the failure of Import Substitution Industrialization to wean the Chilean economy off of its dependence on foreign imports and copper exports, coupled with the ensuing industrialization, led to declining living standards, labour conditions, and a massive shift in the population gradient from rural areas to cities and centres of manufacture (Silva 80-81). The Popular Unity government extended Eduardo Frei's

policies on the nationalization of private industries such as mining and banks, as well as the redistribution of land, and the development of public education (Crow 813-814). In addition to developing these programs, unlike Frei's Christian Democrats, Allende was motivated by the necessity of consolidating democratic principles and incorporating all elements of the nation in its processes, versus simply aiming to placate the popular masses with minor adjustments and reforms to their quality of living without any major improvements or socio-economic change (Posner 55).

Theories Behind Chile's Political Breakdown

The effects of the Chilean "road to socialism" on the nation's economic and political environment had more to do with the reception of Allende's policies by fellow elites than with the implications of the actual policies on the general public. Many have made the argument that the Popular Unity government's social and political changes, as previously listed, proved detrimental to the nation's fiscal and political health; however, given the success and uncontested nature of many of these same reforms under Frei and, even earlier, in the constitution itself (Chossudovsky 956), it is likely that the direction of these reforms under Allende posed a palpable threat to the oligarchic democracy. For example, although the Christian Democrats' and Partido Nacional protested against UP's reforms supposedly contributing to the economic downturn—which deteriorated shortly afterwards—the growing opposition from these parties, which culminated in an organic crisis, was more directly a consequence of the elite's aversion to radical and Marxist politics (Lewis 204-206; Loveman 84).

In this case, not only had the military been trained to harbor a deep suspicion of Communist and radical ideologies, but the idea that they might disrupt the political stability and security of the rigid and historically continuous oligarchic democracy provided grounds to preempt such subversion of the status quo (84). In this respect, the last forty years of democratic stability were characterized by the subdual and incapacitation of threats to the hegemonic historic bloc, and by the manufacturing of consent. Essentially, what Allende sought to do was to eliminate the facade of a mutually beneficial relationship between the citizenry and the elites that had been conjured up under the hegemony in order to preserve the

archaic semi-feudal agrarian system, as well as to support the growth of urban industry through *haciendas* and the exploitation of labour. To further prove this point, the UP's emphasis on nationalization of industries and broadening the power of labour unions was socially progressive in the changes it proposed, but destabilizing for the inter-elite power structure. After Pinochet staged a coup to remove Allende, "the objective social relations and the inherent nature of the State [reflected] continuity...with respect to the 1960s era of reforms. The military takeover is at the same time *restoration* as well as *transition* to a more authoritarian and repressive form of capitalism." (Chossudovsky 956). This demonstrates the emphasis on "restoration" of the pre-1970 political arrangement, and the consequent retraction of civil and political rights for the middle and working classes, as the monetarist Pinochet regime led Chile into the very opposite direction of the "road to socialism," characterized by tyranny and authoritarian brutality that heavily repressed political and civil dissent.

As mentioned above, an alternative cause of the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973 that has been proposed is the failure of Salvador Allende's government to secure a strong and favourable transition as the historic bloc began to implode; for instance, in the wake of the debt crisis, nationalizations and subsidies could have been postponed, and this transition could have been proposed over a longer period of time, so as to allow the redolent semi-feudal system to slowly transform while incorporating the labour elements at a slower pace. Instead, the UP's focus on further developing this revolution led to the disaffection of an increasing number of its constituents, particularly the middle and lower strata—amidst whom Allende had hoped to build his support base—as the reality of inflation and resource shortages, products of ISI, slowly set in (Fleet 769). Faced with burgeoning unrest in the public sector, and incapable of sustaining its fiscally taxing social program, subsidies, and nationalizations after the massive expenditures of the Frei regime (Lewis 202), the present power structure found itself unable to adapt to the impending changes—particularly the land reforms and redistribution of wealth.

This alternative perspective argues that this lack of foresight on the behalf of Allende's government—and not the inherent and condemning paradox contained within oligarchic democracy—created an irreconcilable conflict between the unstoppable force of democracy and the immovable object that was the historic bloc (Fleet 769). However, as mentioned earlier, the example of Alessandri's "great reforms" of the early 1920s demonstrate that even in

the face of relative economic stability during the transition away from oligarchic democracy, the primary obstacle did not arise from a conflict amidst the shifting means of capital accumulation (Lewis 197), but from the conservative opposition to this shift and the elites who identified land reform and politicization of the working classes as a threat to the overlying power structure of the hegemonic historic bloc, consequently remaining rigid and unwilling to adapt to change (Robles-Ortiz 524-25). In this respect, the revolutionary sentiment which grew amidst the working class and peasantry under Allende was no different than that which had emerged under Jorge Alessandri; the reaction of elites to the mobilization of these classes and the address of the “social question” was also much the same under both the Alessandri and Allende governments. The implementation of military rule and the use of coercive force intervened to accomplish, at the behest of the elite and middle classes, what liberal oligarchic democracy failed to with its hegemony—namely, the repression of burgeoning liberal democracy (Sigmund, 289).

On the note of continuity versus change, the economic structure of Chilean democracy was problematic, as the disparity between the accumulations of wealth was directly related to the inherent class divide between the elites and the popular masses (Lewis 40). This issue could only be either resolved through either a form of democratic socialism—in which the entire system would need to be changed in order to reconcile the economic and political contradictions through the displacement of landed oligarchs and urban elites as the dominant classes—or through the employment of military means to preserve the existing disarticulated development, class divides, and the present distribution of wealth and property. The former solution, as mentioned above, was salient in Salvador Allende’s government (Crow 815); however, he lacked the necessary backing of his constituents and so his attempts to resolve the contentions between the vestiges of oligarchic democracy and the emergent political and economic consciousness in the public sector were contested by certain elites who identified the prospects of land reform and bank nationalization as an attack on their grip on power. Again, this failure to adapt to change eliminated the viability of a socialist democracy as a successful regime in 1973, limiting the options to military intervention.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Chile's unique period of oligarchic democracy during more than half of the 20th century, as well as the attempt at reform under Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, this paper has sought to establish the foundations for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973, given the nation's relatively stable and democratic past.

After the examination of historical factors contributing to a stable oligarchic democracy—as well as the direct effects of Allende's reforms and the alternative approach to how these reforms affected the political and economic stability of the state—the general conclusion that can be drawn is that the bourgeois elites and middle classes employed the military as the most viable and beneficial solution to suppressing the imminent clash between the oligarchic institutions and the growing mobility of the popular masses and peasantry. In taking recourse in the Chilean armed forces, the elites ensured the preservation of their dominant position in the overlying power structure, and maintained the economic and political status quo at the time, at the expense of the articulation of accumulation and political processes.

As explored in the main thesis of this essay, as well as from an alternative perspective, Salvador Allende's road to socialism transformed the working class in a manner which confronted the current system with an indigestible force, for which there were no peaceful and rational outlets, and from which the only possible outcomes were either socialist democracy or military dictatorship. Due to the prominence of the oligarchic institutions within the many facets of the state, such as the judiciary and Congress (Fleet 772), anything short of a complete overhaul—a Marxist revolution—could not ensure the success of democracy unfettered by the elite's interests and anxieties, and so, ultimately owing to the inadaptable and obdurate nature of the elites, the organic crisis was quelled by military intervention, bringing an end to four decades of political stability.

However, although democracy crumbled under the pressure of reforms in an oligarchic system, this experiment in both liberal and oligarchic aspects of democracy may have planted the seeds of lasting democracy for the post-Pinochet era. Indeed, as Peter Smith observed, “countries with prior democratic experience are more likely to become democratic than countries without such experience” (15).

Bibliography

BBC. Chile Timeline. 2 April 2011. 11 November 2011

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1222905.stm>.

Chossudovsky, Michel. "Capital Accumulation in Chile and Latin America." Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 13, No.23 (1978): 955-962.

Crow, John Armstrong. The Epic of Latin America. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.

Fleet, Michael H. "Chile's Democratic Road to Socialism." The Western Political Quarterly December 1973: 772

Gillespie, Charles Guy. "Democratic Consolidation in the Southern Cone and Brazil: Beyond Political Disarticulation?" Third World Quarterly, Vol. 11, No.2 (1989): 92-113.

Hudson, Rex A. (ed.). "Constitutional History." 1994. Chile: A Country Study. 15 October 2011 <<http://countrystudies.us/chile/85.htm>>.

Lewis, Paul H. Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America: Dictators, Despots, and Tyrants. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Loveman, Brian. For la Patria: Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999.

Posner, Paul W. "Local Democracy and the Transformation of Popular Participation in Chile." Latin American Politics and Society, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2004): 55-81.

Rai, Lajput. "Peaceful Transition to Socialism: The Prospect in Chile." Economic and Political Weekly 18 November 1972: 2293.

Robles-Ortiz, Claudio. "Agrarian Capitalism and Rural Labour: The Hacienda System in Central Chile, 1870-1920." Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 41, no. 3 (2009): 493-526.

Sigmund, Paul E. The Overthrow of Allende and the Politics of Chile, 1964-1976. Pittsburgh:

University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977.

Silva, Eduardo. "The Import-Substitution Model: Chile in Comparative Perspective." Latin

American Perspectives, Vol.34, No. 3 (2007): 67-90.

Smith, Peter H. Democracy in Latin America. Berkeley: CLAS, University of California, 2004.

Third Year Essay
Citation Style: MLA