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Chile: Uneasy Truce With Pinochet's Critics

The Chilean Government's recent moves to ameliorate its human rights practices are helping to remove a major irritant in relations with some of its domestic critics, particularly the Catholic Church and--to a lesser extent--labor. The government's long-term intentions--such as an eventual return to democratic processes--inspire skepticism, but many Chileans concede that the government seems to have ended the worst aspects of its repression. 150

The church has adopted a more conciliatory attitude and is studiously avoiding a confrontation with the government. The warming trend has been most evident in comments by Cardinal Silva, a liberal who has frequently voiced opposition to the government's policies. The Cardinal, an astute political observer, is urging church leaders to be cautious in applying pressure on the government, since he judges that such tactics would be counterproductive.

Cardinal Silva is advocating that church views be communicated privately to President Pinochet and other top officials. He believes this approach offers a better chance for moderating government practices. The election last month of a conservative bishop, a good friend of Pinochet, to head the church's permanent episcopal committee reflects the new mood.

One prominent liberal church spokesman believes the newly elected bishop, a clever and capable administrator, may be able to exert a positive influence on the President. The improved relations between church and state, however, will not prevent church liberals from speaking out bluntly if they find that the government is backsliding on human rights.

On the labor front, a threatened showdown between Pinochet and a group of democratic trade union leaders seems to have been averted when the President shelved--at least for the moment--plans to oust them from their


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union positions. Under the current political moratorium, union elections are prohibited, and the government can remove and replace labor officials at will.

The government's antipathy for the labor leaders stems from its conviction that they are being used by the Christian Democratic Party and are engaging in political activity to embarrass the government. While this does not appear to be the case, misgivings about the political motives of the group's spokesman may cause some of the labor leaders to reassess their role. A consensus may be developing among them to avoid provocations that could further jeopardize their status.

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The government will continue to look askance at free labor activity, but the current truce at least suggests a more tolerant policy. Both sides, in fact, seem disposed to avoid extremes and to seek a modus vivendi.

Like the church, labor may perceive that it has more to gain by ending an adversary relationship and switching to more subtle forms of protest. At a minimum, both groups apparently believe that changed conditions in Chile could provide the climate for a gradual relaxation of harsh restrictions. [REDACTED]

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