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Chile: Pinochet the Next Civilian President? 

A key element in Chilean politics as that country moves toward civilian rule is the role President Pinochet intends to play. In the face of persisting contrary predictions by his numerous detractors and the considerable efforts of his domestic and international adversaries, Pinochet has ridden out a series of heavy political storms without serious damage to himself or to his regime. He has presided, in addition, over a national economic recovery and an improvement in human rights conditions and, in so doing, has established himself, arguably, as South America's foremost military politician. Pinochet has not only shown himself skillful and durable, but--despite the discontent that long political tenure usually brings--Gallup Polls and other indicators suggest that he enjoys wide popularity. 

Ascendancy of the Civilian Team

Recent reports that Pinochet is giving the dominant policymaking voice to a set of advisers who favor accelerating the return to civilian government have prompted speculation about Pinochet's own views on transition. This cohesive group includes top businessmen, Foreign Minister Cubillos, political strategists, and the well-known economic team consisting of sophisticated administrators and theoreticians who have shaped the government's successful free market economic policy. Their influence has extended not only to the nomination of Cabinet appointees but also to the handling of Chile's relations with international labor organizations. As their influence has expanded, so has opposition from within the military and other elite groups. 

Members of the team aspire to do more than give technical advice; they also have strong views about the pace of return to civilian government. Their belief that elections should be held in the early 1980s has put them in conflict with many Chilean Army officers and with Pinochet's own previously stated position that

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elections should not take place until 1985. Their ascendancy, their strong political views, and their closeness to Pinochet obviously invite the question of whether Pinochet may now favor a quicker "retorno," a policy he may find favorable to his own political ambitions. [REDACTED]

For a number of reasons, many Chilean Army officers would like to see the longest possible delay in returning power to civilians. They fear the potential disruption--terrorist, paramilitary, and political--of the groups and individuals displaced by the coup of 1973 and the brutal repression that followed it should civilian government be restored too early. They are particularly concerned that these groups and individuals will seek violent revenge against individual officers and the military in general. [REDACTED]

The Chilean Tactical Pattern

The conflict between Army officers and the civilian team over the pace of return to civilian rule is one that must be resolved. The vigor, power, and articulateness of the civilian team mean that the issue will not go away. Just as the Army officers see safety in delay, the economic team, which has a vested interest in the preservation of the free market system, sees safety in a quicker and more adroit handling of the [REDACTED] problem. In this they are consistent with what has come to be a pattern of tactical response by the Pinochet government to domestic and international opposition. To strong challenges from its opponents, the regime answers by offering to negotiate or arbitrate, and--without giving up too much in the process--generally seeks to avoid head-on collisions. [REDACTED]

These tactics have characterized the Chilean Government's responses to a series of recent challenges:

- In the Beagle dispute, Chile's rhetoric softened as the Argentines became more bellicose. The conflict is now in Papal mediation with the Chileans having retreated very little from their original position.

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- In the dispute with ORIT, an inter-American labor organization, Chilean concessions averted a boycott, although major substantive issues are still to be negotiated.
- In the UN human rights sphere, the Pinochet regime has allowed a UN investigatory committee to enter the country without great political loss.
- In the Peruvian espionage case, the Chilean Government has studiously avoided retaliatory measures and heated language even after the Chilean Ambassador in Lima was declared persona non grata.
- In the Letelier case, the Pinochet regime from the start has labeled it a "judicial" matter, thus bypassing official political polemics.

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This approach may emanate from the civilian team, but it is supported by Pinochet despite his temperamental inclination to take verbal swipes at his enemies. This responsiveness apparently is now being proposed as a way to manage the return to civilian government. The economic team probably reasons that after five years of military rule, latent political forces within Chile cannot remain unchanneled until 1985 without risking an explosion. Moreover, if by positioning themselves skillfully, regime tacticians can win the first election, political power may reside with supporters of the present regime for a good many years. ██████████

An important factor in this thinking is the election of the next President. The new constitution probably will provide for a strong president elected for a term of six or eight years. The civilian team understands that Pinochet's popularity will be an important resource in any future election. Thus it would enhance their own interests to suggest to him that he convert his mass support into a long-term asset by running for president, and the sooner the better. ██████████

At present, it is doubtful that any opposition candidate could defeat Pinochet--especially under electoral

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rules that require winning by a majority. If the civilian advisers succeed in convincing Pinochet to accelerate the process of restoring civilian government, he may urge the speedy surrender of military power to ensure, among other things, his continued leadership as a civilian president.



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