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597



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**REGIONAL AND
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Chile: Breaking New Ground

150

President Pinochet's speech on July 9 setting forth a timetable for the return to civilian government has evoked widespread comment within Chile--some of it critical of the timing and details of the plan.

Nevertheless, most politically astute Chileans evidently see the move as positive; they believe that Pinochet has opened doors that he will be unable to close. Debate over Chile's political future appears to be gathering momentum and may put additional pressure on the military for further liberalization.

The timing of the announcement caught many officials by surprise, but most cited it as a step in the right direction. Some of the government's most conservative backers even suggested that there was room for modification. Foreign Minister Carvajal--a hardliner and staunch backer of the President--told the US embassy that the timetable might be accelerated; right-wing ideologue and presidential adviser Jaime Guzman said the program was "flexible." The time span forecast by Pinochet seemed to rankle other military and civilian supporters who believe it would prolong military rule unduly. Critics allude to the possibility that Pinochet could stay in power until 1991.

The most outspoken criticism came from Air Force Chief and junta member General Leigh, whose blunt remarks are indicative of indignation within the junta over not being consulted on important matters. In a semipublic forum and in the presence of foreign ambassadors, General Leigh expressed his disagreement with the extended time frame of Pinochet's plan. Leigh stated that the three-phase program was much more conservative and restrictive than he had been led to believe. In public statements, Leigh had already made it clear that the junta had not been polled for its opinions, but merely informed of the general outlines of the new policies.

28 July 1977

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

156

Both Leigh and his navy counterpart, Admiral Merino, have been pressing for a more rapid transition from military rule. Lifting the state of siege and curtailing the extraordinary powers of the President's intelligence chief have been high on their list of priorities. Many top army leaders also thought a statement of intention by the government was long overdue. The combined impact of this thinking within the military and the international isolation of Chile contributed strongly to forcing Pinochet's hand.

Criticism from the officially banned Christian Democratic Party was predictable. While the plan was welcomed in principle, the party argued that it did not go far enough in setting limits to present authoritarian restrictions. The bottom line, [REDACTED] is the right of the Chilean people to determine their own form of government and the pace of political transition. At least one party official has questioned the Christian Democrat's decision to flatly reject Pinochet's initiative, suggesting that some sectors may be encouraged by recent developments and willing to work toward a modus vivendi with the government. It would be uncharacteristic, however, for Pinochet to swallow his pride and consider opening a dialogue with political leaders such as former president Eduardo Frei. To most of the armed forces leadership, Frei and his party are still anathema.

Despite some domestic grumbling over details of the long-time process disclosed by Pinochet, the Chilean government was pleased with the generally positive reaction of the US government, and Santiago probably hopes that it marks a turning point in relations. Obviously sensitive to the appearance of trying to placate international opinion, Chilean spokesmen were at pains to point out that the President acted with a "sovereign mandate" and that the move was "a spontaneous gesture" that in no way responded to external pressures. Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry reacted with distinct satisfaction to official statements by the French and Belgian governments noting the "great importance" of the speech.

Whatever the long-term implications of the proposed blueprint, the decision to go public with it at this time has definitely started the political pot simmering.

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28 July 1977

2
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15C

Politically sophisticated Chileans--long accustomed to democratic practices--see this as the beginning of a new stage; few believe that the nostrums prescribed by Pinochet will survive in their present form. As Pinochet turns to translating his vague ideas on the transition to constitutionality into reality, he probably will have to take into account the diversity of opinion within military and civilian circles regarding the future structure of government. On the other hand, there is little chance that the Chilean military will preside over the rebirth of the same system that existed prior to 1973.

In time, hardliners within the President's entourage may moderate their views enough to reach some kind of accommodation with influential political sectors of society. As the wounds of the past heal, the prospects for a more open and tolerant government will increase. The restoration of a true democratic process will be conditioned by many factors--not all of which can be predicted now--but the chances at least look better for the future than they have at any point since the military takeover. [REDACTED]

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28 July 1977

3
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