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The Popular Front in Chile as a Communist Path to Power

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THE POPULAR FRONT IN CHILE AS A COMMUNIST PATH TO POWER

In mid-May the Communist Party of Chile and the Radical Party issued a joint statement calling for unity of all leftist "progressive forces." Although the statement was in response to what the Communists claimed was a threat of an imminent military coup, many political observers saw in it the beginnings of a resurrected Popular Front similar to that which existed in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Communists and Radicals were careful to explain that their joint statement did not constitute a formal alliance. Chilean politicians are experts at the art of compromise, however, and it is not impossible that a broad leftist grouping could emerge after the congressional elections next March give evidence of the relative strengths of the various parties.

Historical Background

The founding of the Chilean Popular Front in 1936 was in large part due to the organizational efforts of a Peruvian Communist, Eudocio Ravines, who had been sent to Chile from Moscow by the Comintern. Ravines and his European colleagues encouraged the Chilean Communists to end their political isolation and to take a more active part in the political life of the country. By 1936, the Communists had joined a bloc that has been formed by other leftist parties the preceding year. At about the same time, this leftist bloc was joined by the Radicals, an opportunistic party that saw in this grouping a means of breaking the rightist monopoly of Chilean politics.

The Popular Front first demonstrated its strength in the

congressional elections in 1937, electing 10 of 25 senators and 66 of 146 deputies. In the 1938 presidential race, the Communists were instrumental in assuring the nomination by the Front of the Radical Pedro Aguirre Cerda rather than the Socialist Marmaduke Grove, who had led a coup in 1932 establishing a "Socialist Republic" that lasted 12 days. Although Communist support was also

"There are social sectors, there are countries which have real party politics, a democratic life, real civil liberties. In such places one adopts the Popular Front, to attract the left wingers and the leftist groups, good or bad, sincere or not. Tempt them, each through his particular weakness.... Help them to get what they want; put pressure, first with offers, later with threats. Compromise them if you can, so that they can't get away."

Mao Tse-Tung
to Eudocio Ravines,
Moscow, 1935

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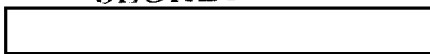
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important in Aguirre's subsequent victory, the party decided not to participate in the government, thus retaining freedom to criticize the administration while claiming credit for its success.

Political differences placed severe strains on the Popular Front during World War II, and the fragile unity that was achieved in 1941 was almost completely destroyed in a dispute over a candidate for the special presidential election held after Aguirre's resignation and subsequent death. The Communists favored a leftist Radical, Gabriel Gonzalez Videla, but in the end they and most of the other leftist parties supported another Radical, Juan Antonio Rios, who was elected.

A Socialist split in 1944 enabled the Communists to increase their popular following. In 1946, the Communists again supported Gonzalez Videla, and after his victory accepted three portfolios in his cabinet--Communications and Public Works, Agriculture, and Lands and Colonization.

The three ministers were ousted early in 1947 because of the party's involvement in labor agitation, and in 1948 a new "Law for the Defense of Democracy" outlawed the party and removed Communists from the voting rolls. The party retained its organization, however, and its members in Congress were permitted to serve out their terms. The Communists continued to make gains among the workers while cooperat-

ing with other leftist parties in a variety of formal and informal coalitions.

Popular Action Front, 1956-1968

The most important leftist political group to develop in recent years is the Popular Action Front (FRAP), which was established in 1956. FRAP was formed when the Popular Socialist and Popular Democratic parties merged with the People's National Front, which consisted of the Chilean Democratic, the Socialist, and the Labor parties, as well as the Communists, who were still officially outlawed. The Law for the Defense of Democracy was repealed in 1958 and since then the Communists have participated fully in Chilean politics.

Since 1956 the various minor parties have disappeared and FRAP is now essentially a coalition of the Communist and Socialist parties. This collaboration has been strained because the Socialists are much less enthusiastic about participating in elections than are the Communists. The Socialists have maintained close ties with Cuba and in general take a much harder line toward the government and are more willing to use violent means to attain power.

Since December 1966, FRAP has cooperated informally with the Radical Party, both in electing pro-Castro Socialist Senator Salvador Allende president of the Senate and in three legislative by-elections. This cooperation cost FRAP the support of about

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one third of the Socialist Party, which split from the main party last summer under the leadership of Senator Raul Ampuero. Ampuero and his followers, now officially organized as the Popular Socialist Union (USP), oppose cooperation with the "bourgeois" Radical Party.

FRAP served the Communist Party as a political vehicle while the party was still proscribed. Since the party's legalization in 1958 FRAP has been a useful electoral device to secure votes that would not normally go to an overtly Communist candidate. In view of continuing strains between the Communists and the Socialists, however, its viability in the future will depend in large part on how well the parties do in the congressional elections next March.

The Radical Party

The Radical Party has become known in Chilean politics as the "spoon" or patronage party. It was not noted for its ideological rigidity, but rather was willing to adopt whatever political line appeared to promise the greatest rewards at any given time. In general, it has spoken for and worked for the benefit of the growing Chilean middle class.

The three Radical presidents who held office from 1938 to 1952 were said to have been elected by the left to rule with the right. Since 1966, however, the party has begun to move to a leftist ideological position that in some ways has restricted the

freedom of action it had enjoyed for so long.

The party's informal cooperation with FRAP has permitted it to claim credit for victories in two important by-elections and for "protecting" the interests of the workers against President Frei's stabilization policies. At the same time, however, this cooperation has alienated some important sources of funds and support. In addition, there has been some evidence that moderates are making a slight comeback within the party leadership. If the leadership could get FRAP support for a Radical presidential candidate in 1970--even a member of the leftist faction--the party probably would coalesce behind him. Support for a Communist or a Socialist might be more difficult to sell to the membership, however.

The Left Wing of the PDC

A potentially important factor in any broad leftist grouping is the extreme left wing of President Frei's Christian Democratic Party (PDC). This group is impatient with the pace of the government's reform program and is firmly committed to the "noncapitalistic way" of economic development. On many occasions it takes positions closer to those of the Communist Party than of President Frei.

The leading contender for the PDC presidential nomination is Radomiro Tomic, who recently returned from three years as Chilean ambassador to the US.

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Tomic visualizes himself as the leader of a broad leftist front that would include Communists and other leftist parties. The Communists, however, have said they could never support Tomic but have hinted that they might support a leftist Christian Democrat such as former party president Gumucio.

The extreme leftists controlled the leadership of the PDC from July 1967 to January 1968. At that time, strong personal intervention by President Frei returned control of the party to moderates, who have shown considerably more political acumen recently than they had evidenced earlier. The national leadership organized a strong campaign for a congressional by-election in July, in which the PDC candidate scored an expected yet impressive victory.

There has been some speculation that the extreme left wing of the PDC might support a FRAP-sponsored presidential candidate if the PDC itself nominated a moderate. The party leadership has ousted some of the extreme leftists and is exerting pressure for conformity on those still in the party. In any event, the extreme leftist group is not large enough numerically to be very important in the coming elections. Its ouster from the party would probably make a PDC candidate more appealing to the more moderate independent voter.

The Communist Party Today

The present Chilean Communist Party (PCCh) is a far cry

from the disorganized group of the early 1930s. Today it is probably the best organized party in Chile and undoubtedly the best disciplined. It has an accepted role in the Chilean political structure and usually is quick to condemn terrorist bombings carried out by extremist splinter groups.

The present Communist leadership sees a good chance of electing a Communist-supported president in 1970 and will take no action that might jeopardize this goal. In May, when discontent in the military over low pay generated coup rumors, the Communists stridently denounced any action to bring down Frei, fearing that the first act of a military government would be to proscribe the party. In contrast, the Socialists and some extremist groups were saying privately that some sort of antigovernment action was necessary to provide the conditions for a subsequent revolutionary take-over. The Communists also feared that if they were proscribed, the Socialists and other leftist parties would make great gains at their expense.

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The PCCh is a strong backer of Moscow in the present polemic within the world Communist movement as to the efficacy of armed as opposed to peaceful revolution. It is significant that when the remnants of "Che" Guevara's guerrilla group escaped to Chile from Bolivia, it was a Socialist rather than a Communist leader who arranged for their repatriation. The PCCh can be expected to pull out all the stops between now and 1970 to vindicate its opposition to violence.

Outlook

The PCCh finds itself at present in an extremely flexible position. It is being wooed by several political factions, and even has hinted that it might

run its own presidential candidate in 1970. The Radical Party leadership is trying to cement its relations with the Communists. The Socialist Party opposes close cooperation with the Radicals, but is unwilling to break its long-standing collaboration with the Communists. The extreme left wing of the PDC, despite its recent setbacks, continues to advocate collaboration with all progressive leftist forces. It is one of the ironies of the Communists' present position that, although they can translate their support of a Radical or a Socialist into a substantial voter turnout, members of other parties may be more likely to abstain than to vote for a Communist, regardless of party policy.

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