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Chile: Pinochet's Efforts To Strengthen Position

President Pinochet's removal of Air Force General Leigh from the ruling junta is only the preliminary bout leading up to the main event. The Chilean press is speculating that Manuel Contreras, the former head of the National Intelligence Directorate, will be among those indicted next week in the assassination of former Ambassador to the US Orlando Letelier. Because it is widely believed that Contreras would not have acted without President Pinochet's consent, the President expects a rough time ahead and has been working to consolidate his political position.

Leigh's ouster was the culmination of his longstanding feud with Pinochet over the political future of the country. In this instance, Leigh's personal criticism of Pinochet during an interview with a foreign correspondent was too much for the President, who was supported by the other junta members and the Council of Ministers. Leigh's removal eliminates Pinochet's most critical colleague and strengthens the President's control over the junta.

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Pinochet clearly outflanked his rival in the proceedings. Leigh claims that he will take his case to the Supreme Court, but he has little chance for success. [REDACTED] think he is finished as a political force, even though the Air Force general officers maintained an almost solid front with their former leader by either retiring or resigning--19 of 21 Air Force generals are gone. The newly appointed generals apparently are loyal to Pinochet.

Leigh's successor, former Minister of Health General Fernando Matthei, told the press that he was surprised

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by his appointment. He claimed that he himself had been contemplating resigning from the Air Force because he was not in agreement with the positions taken by Leigh. It is almost certain, however, that Matthei had earlier agreed to join the junta. Matthei, 51, is a scrupulously honest, political conservative and is considered to be pro-US.



General Fernando Matthei,
newly appointed junta member

Before his ouster of Leigh, Pinochet apparently believed that his position needed strengthening. In recent weeks, he has been campaigning throughout the country for a continuation of his government. He has argued that many of Chile's domestic problems would become unmanageable if he were removed. Pinochet also has been successful in playing upon fears that Chile is being encircled by unfriendly governments and that it is often the victim of foreign intervention in its domestic affairs.

One aspect of his campaign has been the formation of a personalist political vehicle supporting the President. The Christian Democrats and other politicians have been critical of this, but they are not in a position to hinder it if Pinochet judges that the public is in favor. The President has substantial popular appeal, and even his critics admit that he has been an effective leader in highly troubled times. Personal movements have had less success in Chile, however, than in other Latin American countries.

Despite Pinochet's efforts, some military officers are reported to have been conducting low-key discussions on the possibility of replacing him. For the few who have considered the President a liability for some time, the prospect that Contreras may be indicted argues for a clean sweep of the current leadership. For the

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majority who still support Pinochet, however, the only way to preserve the accomplishments of the military regime is to keep him in power. Although they have little else in common, both groups believe that Contreras and Pinochet will be condemned anew by the world media and that Chile's international reputation will be further tarnished.

Whatever happens during the next several weeks, it is clear that Pinochet is prepared to fight any move to oust him. His inclination is to tough it out, relying on his military and popular support as well as on his belief that he himself cannot be indicted in the Letelier murder. The Army remains the critical factor in these events. Pinochet, at present, is backed by the majority of Army generals. Should this support begin to erode, however, the President's days will be numbered. We believe this process has already begun and will be accelerated by the announcement and contents of the Letelier indictments. [REDACTED]

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