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CHILE: Opposition to Plebiscite

Opposition in Chile to a plebiscite on a new constitution is increasing, indicating that the vote may be a focal point for rising discontent. [REDACTED]

Tens of thousands of Chileans--moderates and Marxists--staged a rally on Wednesday to protest the proposed constitution and the procedures for the plebiscite scheduled for 11 September. It was the largest opposition gathering in the military regime's seven-year history. [REDACTED]

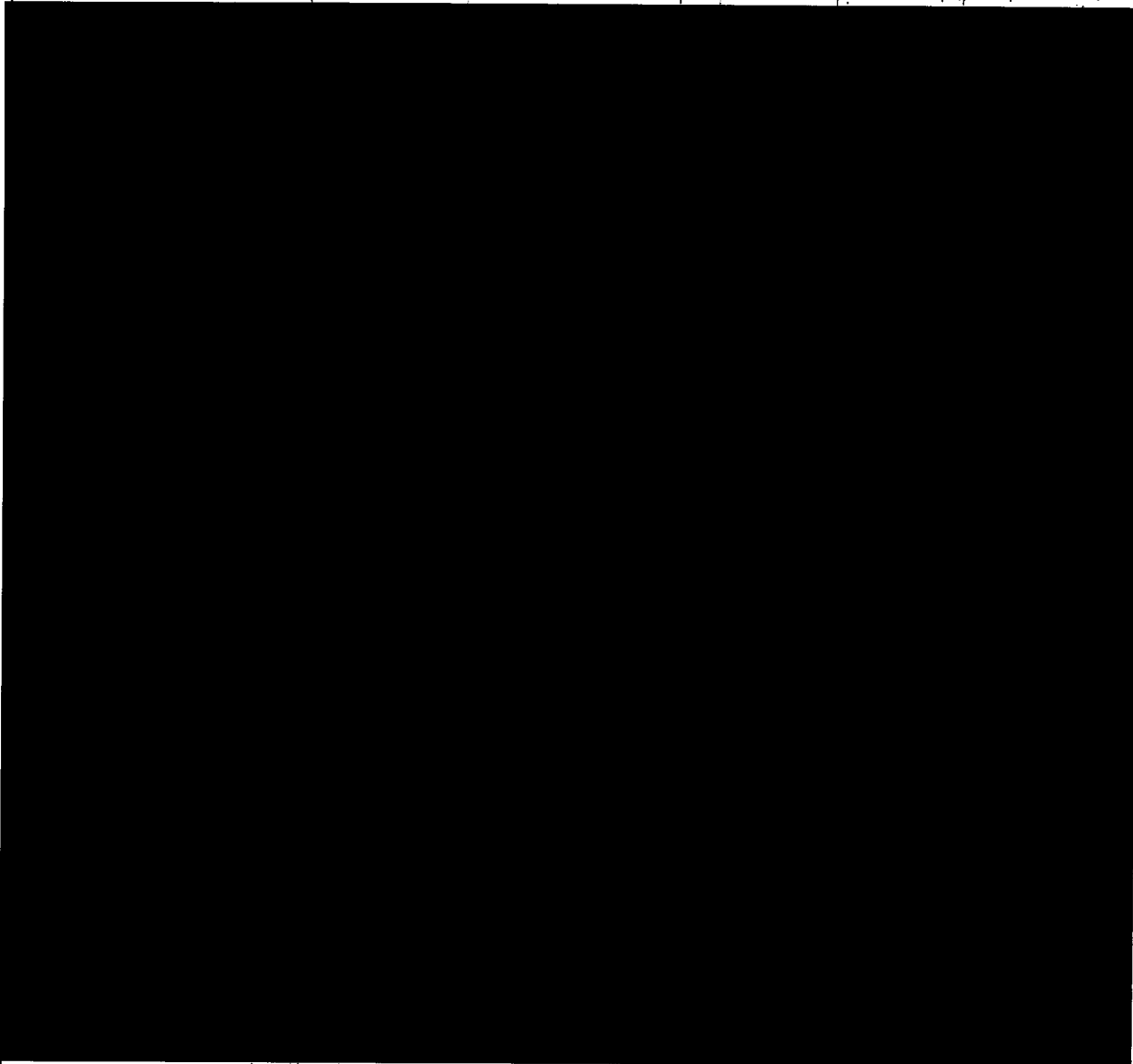
The crowd strongly backed former President Frei's demands for a transition government leading to civilian rule. The proposed constitution calls for continued direct military rule until 1989. [REDACTED]

When President Pinochet announced the plebiscite two weeks ago, he probably expected that the long-dormant opposition would be unable to organize itself in time to marshal significant support for a "no" vote. He had hoped that the plebiscite, by publicly reaffirming his rule, would give the government greater legitimacy both at home and abroad. This was the case in 1978, when Chileans rejected UN criticism of the government by a three-to-one margin. [REDACTED]

The opposition, however, has coalesced more rapidly than Pinochet had anticipated. Politicians who were reluctant to side with foreign critics in 1978 now are more willing to campaign against a constitution that would have a negative effect on domestic politics for years to come. [REDACTED]

Pinochet probably will attempt to play on Chilean fears that rejecting the constitution would lead to a return to the chaos of the Allende years. He is unlikely to cancel the plebiscite because his personal prestige is committed to it. If its opponents appear to be gaining momentum, however, the government may clamp down on their public meetings and access to the media. [REDACTED]

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