National Intelligence Daily

Thursday
11 September 1980

Top Secret

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CHILE: Constitutional Plebiscite

President Pinochet is likely to win today's plebiscite on a new constitution, but the political costs could outweigh the benefits to his military regime.

The election probably will be fair--there was no known fraud in a referendum in 1978. An overwhelmingly favorable vote would lend an aura of legitimacy to the regime for the first time in its seven-year history. The constitution confirms direct military rule until 1989 and gives Pinochet the option of running for an eight-year civilian term at that time.

A convincing vote also would make it easier for Pinochet to ignore foreign critics, including the countries in the Organization of American States that considered sponsoring a resolution protesting the plebiscite. In addition, domestic opposition leaders who have urged a "no" vote would appear discredited.

The referendum, however, also entails serious risks. Some of the regime's supporters believe that if a 60-percent "yes" vote is not obtained, the military would be embarrassed and could demand changes in government policies and personnel.

The newly aroused opposition is trying to use the plebiscite to rally popular discontent. Church-state relations--already strained by recent government repression in response to an upsurge in terrorism--have worsened. Chilean bishops have publicly complained that the plebiscite offers no reasonable alternative to continued military rule if the constitution is rejected.

Even if he wins by a wide margin, Pinochet may eventually regret providing the opposition such a clear target. Unless he takes steps in the next few months to mollify moderate critics while isolating more radical opponents, the plebiscite could prove a hollow victory. Pinochet's past harsh treatment of his detractors, however, raises doubts about his ability to neutralize the opposition.