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Special Analysis

CHILE:

Aylwin Feeling Heat on Human Rights

New evidence of human rights violations during the Pinochet era is complicating President Aylwin's moderate approach to the issue and straining civil-military relations.

Recent discovery in Pisagua of a mass grave for leftists executed by the military after the 1973 coup has led to public outrage and debate among political parties about human rights. The far left is pressing for the removal of Pinochet as Army Commander and the repeal of his Amnesty Law, which protects human rights violators. Leftist extremists are assassinating military officers accused of atrocities. Center-left politicians in the ruling coalition reportedly feel compelled to pay lipservice to extreme positions to retain the moral high ground. The moderate right is stressing the need for reconciliation, arguing that digging up the past will jeopardize political stability.

The military is on the defensive, showing its discomfort with Aylwin's human rights policy. Pinochet has publicly criticized the Aylwin government's handling of past human rights violations, claiming the "civil war" after the 1973 coup justified repression; the previously moderate Navy Chief recently echoed that position. The Air Force Chief has publicly admitted his service committed abuses under Pinochet.

Aylwin has moved quickly to limit damage caused by Pisagua. the administration's initial reaction to a Supreme Court decision to investigate the atrocity was uncoordinated and that one minister criticized the Court's failure to investigate other military abuses. Aylwin has since consulted with church, military, and opposition party representatives and has emphasized that the military is willing to cooperate in the investigations.

Political fallout, nevertheless, is likely to narrow Aylwin's maneuvering room on issues related to human rights and the military, such as judicial reform. Although the outcry over Pisagua has justified his creation last month of a commission to investigate human rights abuses, it also shows the trouble he probably will have in trying to satisfy Chileans with the pace and scope of investigations. Further revelations of atrocities are likely, raising the risk the far left will increase terrorist activity to show its frustration with Aylwin's approach.

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