Chileans overthrow Pinochet regime, 1983-1988

- (mainly or initiated by) people of color [1]
- an example of paradox of repression [2]
- an example of regime change [3]
- included participation by more than one social class [4]

Timing
May 11, 1983
to:
October 1988

Location and Goals
Country:
Chile
Location City/State/Province:
Mainly Santiago, but throughout the country as well
View Location on Map

Goals:
Democratic elections, the resignation of the Pinochet regime, and an end to human rights abuses and economic hardship. Referring to the beginning of the campaign, union leader Rodolfo Seguel said, "we tried to broaden it to the whole country, to protest not just the economic hardship, but human rights abuses, the whole system. Someone had to dare to tell the dictator that he was a dictator, that it was a dictatorship, that we needed a change."

The Alianza Democratica stated their objective saying, "We unite in agreeing to respect and promote certain ethical principles and values that democracy upholds, without which a free, prosperous, just, and fraternal society is not possible."

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 110. Slowdown strike

Methods in 2nd segment:
Methods in 3rd segment:
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 045. Demonstrative funerals
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 097. Protest strike

Methods in 5th segment:

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 028. Symbolic sounds
• 178. Guerrilla theatre

Segment Length:
11 months

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights

Group characterization:

• Opposition political parties
• citizens in general
• trade unions
Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC, led by Rodolfo Seguel), Democratic Alliance (Alianza Democratica, a coalition of opposition political parties)

Partners:
National Workers’ Command, Other unions, opposition political parties, Asamblea de la Civilidad

External allies:

Catholic Church

Governments of other states, including Germany and the United States

Chilean Communist Party

Involvement of social elites:

Ambassadors from other states supported the democracy campaign

Following the 1988 plebiscite, other junta leaders in the regime refused to support Pinochet any longer.

The Catholic Church facilitated an agreement for a transition to democracy between opposition parties and pro-regime parties in 1985

The United Nations condemned the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Alianza Democratica

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- U.S. Government and ambassadors
- Union Democratica Independiente
- Union Nacional

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Asamblea de la Civilidad
- United Nations

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:
11 months
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Chile's military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known. There was armed resistance also going on at the beginning of the campaign, led by Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez and Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario. These armed groups were not partnered with the organizers of the nonviolent resistance and the armed actions only served to provide an excuse for Pinochet to use greater repressive violence.

Repressive Violence:
Pinochet used the army, police, and other security forces to attack demonstrations and to kill protestors and organizers.

Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
9 out of 10 points
Notes on outcomes:
Following the plebiscite of 1988, in which Chileans voted against Pinochet's continued rule, Pinochet was forced to hold democratic elections. The opposition won these elections by a landslide and began the transition towards democracy, although this would take many years. Pinochet remained in charge of the army until the mid-1990s.

The organizing groups survived through the 1988 plebiscite and transition to democracy. The campaign also grew from initially small monthly protests to a national campaign. Hundreds of thousands of people attended rallies in 1983 and 1984 and eventually the population voted against Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite.

On September 11, 1973, a military coup forced the democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende out of power. After the coup Augusto Pinochet established himself as the leader of Chile and set up a military dictatorship with the heavy involvement of his army. During this regime, Pinochet used repressive measures to suppress opposition to his rule, and supported politics that divided any opposition groups. Pinochet moved the country’s economic system away from socialist policies towards a market economy, gaining the support of the pro-capitalist portions of the population. While Pinochet presided over a large economic recovery, the regime also “disappeared” thousands of dissenters to the dictatorship. The National Directorate of Intelligence, which later became the National Center for Intelligence (CNI), was the regime’s security apparatus and targeted journalists, union leaders, and student activists.

In order to bolster the appearance of popular support, the regime called plebiscites, which it won, and organized
its supporters for pro-government rallies. Nonetheless, an economic crisis beginning in 1982 and 1983 led to increasingly widespread dissent, especially with the lack of democracy in Chile. Despite the dictatorship’s attempts to weaken the country’s trade union organizations, such unions, especially the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC) led by Rodolfo Seguel, organized the growing popular dissent into protest against the regime.

In mid-1983 union leaders met to establish a list of demands for the government. On May 11, 1983, the CTC called for the first major protest, which had the support of the National Workers’ Command and several opposition party leaders (from the Communist Party and the Christian Democratic Party). Originally planned as a national strike, but changed to a National Day of Protest, in this first action the people of Santiago slowed down all activities during the day and then let loose a barrage of noise at 8 o’clock in the evening. They banged on pots and pans, honked horns, and used other methods to express solidarity with one another and frustration with the regime. Police responded violently to this action, arresting 600 and killing several protestors. Nonetheless, the action had mobilized the Chileans who were fed up with the military dictatorship.

After the success of this initial protest, the organizing groups began to call monthly protests. Participation grew with each protest as students and poor Chileans from around the country joined the campaign. The opposition political parties (as part of a “Democratic Alliance” formed in August 1983) and the Catholic Church helped to mobilize this growing population of dissenters. Despite repression, groups of journalists openly spread news about protests through newspapers, magazines, and radio. At the time press freedom was just beginning to increase, although the regime still held tight control of television waves.

In addition to the monthly protests, campaigners also used lightning protests, which consisted of short, spontaneous actions with small amounts of people that dispersed before police could arrive. They were begun by small groups of people chanting slogans, or by leaflets dropped from upper stories of tall buildings.

During the monthly protests, the army and security forces used violent repression in an attempt to quell opposition. The regime used the excuse of two armed resistance groups—Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez and Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, which were both separate from the organizers of the nonviolent resistance—to inflict repressive violence on the peaceful demonstrators.

As the regime increased its repressive violence, it simultaneously attempted to foster limited liberalization. The government slightly increased freedom of the press, allowed political exiles to return to the country, and held meetings with political opposition groups. In 1983 and 1984, the Democratic Alliance took advantage of Pinochet’s permission for two mass demonstrations. The opposition alliance mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens to participate in these two major displays of opposition to the government.

Nonetheless, repressive violence continued to occur and undermined the legitimacy of the Pinochet regime. In response to the murder of three Communist Party members in 1985 by security forces, the archbishop of Santiago held a meeting between opposition and pro-regime political parties. Following subsequent meetings, the parties signed the National Accord for the Transition to Full Democracy. Despite this agreement between opposing political forces, the Pinochet regime rejected the accord.

Furthermore, as police forces removed themselves from acts of repression, the army took over the state sanctioned violence against opposition groups. Soldiers and tanks occupied Santiago and attacked protestors.

This army presence gained international attention when a National Workers’ Command-led strike coincided with the Assembly of the International Parliamentary Union in Santiago in May 1986; the army presence during this strike surprised international delegates to the meeting. Journalists for international media sources further
spread information about resistance within Chile. Throughout the campaign, European and North American states began to call more fervently for a transition to democracy within Chile, supporting the actions of the opposition groups within the country.

In early July 1986, the Asamblea de la Civilidad, a group of truckers, retailers, and professionals, called for several national strike days. With wide participation, these strike days were better known for the army’s attack of protestors. On July 2, soldiers set two live demonstrators on fire. Another strike in September gained less support.

Also in September, armed insurgents attempted to assassinate Pinochet, destroying most of his motorcade. Pinochet survived the attack, however, and the attack limited the support for the nonviolent campaign. With the violence of the armed resistance groups having failed and the continued protests lack of success in gaining democratic concessions, the campaigners’ next hope for a shift towards democracy came in the form of a state-sanctioned vote.

In 1987 Pinochet announced that a national plebiscite would be held to either approve or reject his continuation as president. A plebiscite every eight years was written into the 1980 constitution; however, there is some debate over why Pinochet allowed it to occur in 1988. Some say that international conditions, declining dictatorships in other parts of the world, and a shifting of the United State’s focus from communism to other world issues, forced Pinochet to appear more open to democracy. Others cite Pope John Paul II’s visit in 1987 as having been influential in convincing Pinochet to allow the plebiscite to go forward. Still others argue that Pinochet believed he would win the plebiscite and allowed it to go forward because he thought it would quell public unrest and reinforce his hold on power.

The opposition groups quickly organized a unified campaign to defeat the plebiscite; they formed the group concertación de partidos por el NO (coalition of parties for NO). The election laws established in the 1980 constitution, which Pinochet decided to follow, allowed for legal political parties and political advertising. It allotted both sides thirty minutes of television time every day for political advertisement. Since the television channels were all government controlled, and supported Pinochet in the plebiscite, this really meant that the opposition had a very small amount of television time in comparison with the regime’s SÍ campaign. However, the opposition successfully used this time to reach a wide audience of Chileans. Their television campaign consisted of hopeful messages that talked of all the possibilities for Chile’s future, and showed happy people enjoying life. The ads also displayed their symbol, a large rainbow arching over a white background and the word “no” in large black letters. This symbol was also integrated into protests and marches leading up to the plebiscite.

On October 5, 1988, the national plebiscite was held and Pinochet lost, with nearly 55% of the population voting NO. After some hesitation in the days following the plebiscite Pinochet finally agreed to step down after elections when a top military commander publicly acknowledged the NO campaign’s victory and when other members of the military junta refused to support him any longer. Finally on March 10, 1990, Pinochet left office after seventeen years in power, replaced by a democratically elected President from an opposition party.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

Influenced by 1980 Solidarnosc general strike in Poland, which were published often in state-sanctioned media
because of the anti-communist position of the Polish workers (see "Polish workers general strike for economic rights, 1980") (1).

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Shandra Bernath-Plaistad and Max Rennebohm, 31/10/2008 and 07/09/2011

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.

Creative Commons License
Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Original website design and artwork created by Daniel Hunter.
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu.

Registered users can login to the website.


Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color