

A Comparative Analysis of the Influence of Historical Latin American Military Dictatorships on the
Human Rights Crisis in Venezuela

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Recent decades have been marked by significant international political transformations that, in the wake of waning U.S. and European leadership, make way for new actors to take influential, divisive positions in regional and global politics. This paper examines the complicated political military dictatorship histories of prominent actors in the Southern Cone, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay and analyzes the manner in which this historical context lays the foundation for the position that these regional powers take on the political and human rights crisis in Venezuela. Through comparative research, this paper investigates power and legitimacy (in social, political, and security terms) of Southern Cone countries in the wake of their respective pasts, the role that each of these countries play in the present day regional politics, and their responses to the human rights crisis in Venezuela.

As history does not occur in a vacuum, the divisive political position, and cultural foundation of a stance, that any country might boast, is and always has been, the result of the events that a particular country might have experienced. Political stances are often taken in support of or against bedrock ideologies that countries are built upon, and the regional or global alliances that form as a result of these principles. These ideas are demonstrated through the tumultuous authoritarian military-rule regime histories that Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay employed at the conclusion of the 20th century. Whether they were the result of regional influence, a desire to support the citizens of a nation at whatever cost, or the impression that the leaders in power did not have the best interest of its citizens in mind, each of these nations are accountable for operating three of the most prominent military-rule governments of their time in the Southern Cone and, in some cases, Latin America.

While the particular relationship between the military and the regime in power in each country differed, the influence of the military was undoubtedly prevalent in the 20th century authoritarian regimes of the countries that this paper will examine. Prior to analyzing the manner in which the regimes operated and the driving forces behind those operations, it is important to understand that military juntas differ from civilian dictatorships in three ways: (1) the reason(s) for seizing power; (2) the institutions used to organize the way in which they rule and, more specifically, how these juntas treat the opposition; and (3) the manner in which the dictatorship relinquishes power. Furthermore, while the history of events is important in the context of the culture of each country, the manner in which these reborn democracies have dealt with the legacies of military rule is critical to greater regional governance and accountability;

as a result of these complex pasts, the role that each of post-military rule Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay plays in regional politics is closely affected by the social and political power and legitimacy that is associated with the history of each of these Southern Cone actors.

Each of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have been the subject of numerous human rights violations, the employment of torturous tactics, and the unexplained disappearances of millions of citizens throughout the duration of their military-rule regimes. This paper examines the complicated political military dictatorship histories of the aforementioned prominent actors in the Southern Cone and analyzes the manner in which this historical context lays the foundation for the position that these regional powers would take on the modern day political and human rights crisis in Venezuela.

I. Perspectives on the Authoritarian Regimes

David Pion-Berlin, Professor of Political Science at University of California, Riverside, argues that, in the case of Uruguay, elements of dictatorship were “creeping” into place while the country was under democratic rule, well before the coup d’état in 1973. A Latinamericanist known widely for his comparative politics research and writings, Pion-Berlin specializes in civil-military relations, defense, security, and human rights. *Military Dictatorships of Brazil and the Southern Cone* employs a comparative politics examination of the authoritarian military-rule regimes of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay and considers the effect on regional politics that these regimes had at the time that they were in power.

Pion-Berlin argues that important consideration should be given to the “post hoc rationalizations” for the coups that each of the military juntas offered, separately from the short and long-term underlying causes that scholars have offered when the coups were placed in context. Pion-Berlin goes on to argue that the war and conflict justifications that the militaries offered in support of their “intervention and brand of governance” was a reach in regards to the way that the citizens of both Argentina and Uruguay were treated. In many cases, the citizens that were subject to the torturous treatments, unjustified

killings, and kidnappings as a result of the crusade of the military juntas, were not combative, “had no affiliations with any armed, dangerous, or illegal organizations,” were not armed nor dangerous, and were relatively “politically uninvolved.” The adversaries of the juntas in these *guerras sucias* or “dirty wars,” as they became colloquially known, were innocent citizens that were casualties of the hostilities waged against them.

While any number of socio-economic factors, independently, would not have resulted in a successful military coup or assumption of power when the coup occurred in June of 1973, Charles Gillespie, author of *Negotiating Democracy: Politicians and Generals in Uruguay*, argues that “[a] combination of ideological polarization, labor strife, escalating violence, and military role expansion contributed to the slow rise of authoritarian rule in Uruguay.” These factors, many long-time unresolved problems allowed to fester, compounded over time, coupled with the concurrent occurrence, created a path for military governmental rule.

By contrast, however, Pion-Berlin argues that the Chilean military coup that occurred in September of the same year was “largely unexpected,” save for the failed attempted coup that occurred just months prior on June 29. Although President Salvador Allende might have developed suspicions, his unwavering “confidence in his constitutionalist officers remained solid” led him to replace army commander General Carlos Prats with Augusto Pinochet on August 23, the dictator who would assume power 19 days later.

The breakdown of the Chilean democracy breakdown should be understood “as the failure to structure a viable center in a highly polarized society with strong centrifugal tendencies,” according to Arturo Valenzuela, author of *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Chile*, and should not and cannot be “laid solely at the doorstep of economic policy,” adds Pion-Berlin. Moderates from the *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity, of UP) and the Christian Democratic Party (CD) could not build centrist coalition around support of continued economic reforms using lawful, democratic means. Progressives within the CD were

eventually marginalized and broke off to form their own party. Party issues were made worse by U.S. covert intervention, and up until the final moments, the coup plotters failed to gain the support and assistance of top military officials (many of these officers were forced to resign) and it was not until Pinochet finally came on board that the success of the coup was assured and the Allende government met its demise.

While one can argue that each of these countries are responsible for the atrocities that occurred on their watches at the end of the 20th century, the military-rule regimes in power were not without U.S. assistance before and during their reign. The fear of communism, both pre-existent in Cuba and its spread throughout the rest of Latin America, was the driving force behind U.S. involvement. In the case of Chile, Salvador Allende was a known Marxist, and Washington was not happy with the rise of popularity of this threat.

Tim Weiner, 20-year American Intelligence investigative journalist in *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, argues that the scope of the CIA's involvement in Latin American affairs expanded dramatically in the 1960s. Tom Polgar served as the chief of the foreign intelligence staff of the Latin American division from 1965 to 1967. At the time, Polgar's mission was to use the Latin American stations to collect intelligence on the Soviet Union and Cuba; to that end, it was imperative that the target countries operated under "relatively stable" governments, malleable to the needs and desires of the American government.

The CIA supported covert operations and, in some cases, uprisings, in 11 Latin American nations, and the chief U.S. diplomat at the time, Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State during the Nixon Administration, employed drastic unsuccessful measures to keep Allende out of office, in the wake of his election. Although the U.S. ran a \$1 million financial and political panic campaign in Chile, Allende was inaugurated on schedule, and the U.S. grew nervous.

Pion-Berlin notes, in the case of Argentina, the military coup was unsurprising and not unfamiliar considering the military had previously disbanded governments in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, and 1966 in an effort to resolve the “Peronist problem” presented by Juan Perón (1895-1974), the long-time Argentine leader. The Argentine denouement came as the Peronist Party was unable to maintain its coalition of supporters, its tenants came to be in contest with one another, and assassinations at the center of the party resulted in panic that infiltrated nearly every fiber of the country.

While Argentina is a true example of a vacuum left by uncontained violence and steep social, economic decline, and political disarray that the military was willing, able, and ready to fill, the same can be said, in some regards, for Chile and Uruguay, as well.

II. Chile

Prior to 1973, Chile had peacefully operated a 150-year-old civilian constitutional government. However, the coup introduced the stark reality that the government was not invincible. While the attempted military coup during the summer of 1973 might have led President Allende to believe his government was beginning to crumble, he remained confident in his officers and the constitution he so fervently defended. To that end, President Allende appointed Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, a well-respected career officer, as the commander of the army in place of General Carlos Prats.

The September 11, 1973 coup d'état resulted in the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, and his subsequent 17-year regime. As Valenzuela suggests, the breakdown of the Chilean democracy should be understood “as the failure to structure a viable center in a highly polarized society with strong centrifugal tendencies.”

In the month following his rise to power, General Augusto Pinochet announced his plan to “extirpate the root of evil from Chile” and usher in a state of “moral cleansing” that would garner a “democracy purified of vices;” the junta leader went on to exclaim that his “mission” would end “only when the

country has reached social peace and economic development.” Although peace was the declared goal of the leader, peace did not immediately follow. The authoritarian dictatorship constructed by Pinochet targeted civilians that were, or demonstrated a propensity to be, critical of the junta and its’ motives or actions.

By December of 1973, Pinochet’s “moral cleansing” resulted in the death of at least 1,500 civilians, the detention of thousands of Chileans in military prison camps, and the exile of some 7,000 civilians more. Many civilians were shot as a result of ideological confrontations with junta soldiers, hunted down by vigilantes, executed by firing squads, and in many unfortunate cases, plainly tortured to death.

Under Pinochet’s authoritarian government, the imperious nature of the army swelled, as the thread of fear that ran through the chain of command was palpable. While the fear to act autonomously grew amongst the soldiers, so too did defense spending. In 1974, defense spending increased 30 percent, and within the decade, made up 4.6 percent of Chile’s GDP (not including the money spent on Chile’s secret police force). By 1975, Chile had the highest paid military to working-age adult ratio of every Latin American country, with the exception of Cuba. The annual salary of military troops grew to nearly 90 thousand pesos by 1980 from the 60 thousand of 1973. The increase in salary, however, was not unmatched with an increase in enlistment, as well. During this time, the army grew 65 percent to nearly 53 thousand soldiers. This “unprecedented” level of political and military domestic power fostered the growth of a military ego impregnated with a “new sense of self-importance, pride,” and desire for power fueled by the commander-in-chief himself, General Pinochet.

While the military grew boldly as an institution, there was an innate hesitancy among the ranks of the army’s officers to share personal opinions, opinions that were contrary to that of the government, and certainly those opinions that could be considered insurgent.

III. Chile and Venezuela

Against the backdrop of Venezuelan turmoil, Chile has become more vocal in its criticism of the Maduro regime, but has not adopted an official confrontational stance. As the crisis has unfolded in recent years, President Nicolás Maduro “neutralized the opposition-dominated National Assembly elected in December 2015” and has completely eliminated the judiciary’s independence. As a result of Venezuela’s 1999 Constitution written under the Chávez government, the checks and balances of the country’s political system has been diluted to the extent that democracy is barely recognizable; as “[p]ower has been centralized, and the advantages of holding office have become overwhelming,” the Maduro regime has begun to mirror something out of the late 20th century. Much like the military junta governments of 20th century Latin America, government-opposition relations “have become highly confrontational” in present-day Venezuela and Nicolás Maduro is a game-maker operating a zero-sum game with no room for opposition error.

Chile has been largely unwilling to take concrete action though the situation in Venezuela would theoretically allow for a regional actor to take a divisive position in addressing the crisis. Former President Michelle Bachelet took on quite a conservative stance in regards to Venezuela, refusing to take or endorse any significant actions against the Maduro regime, unwilling to offer any criticism of the regime, either. President Sebastián Piñera, as the new leader of a nation whose marred history of terrible human rights violations is no secret, has made it clear than he will not “remain indifferent to the suffering and the pain of the Venezuelan people.” Piñera is aware of and acknowledges the “political, economic and social crisis,” that Venezuela is experiencing, but despite his disbelief that there is any “respect for human rights,” the stance of his administration remains clear: Chile will support no military action in Venezuela, only peaceful, electoral solutions.

Chilean Foreign Minister Heraldo Muñoz offered a firm stance that seemed to be the echo of a tumultuous history with human rights abuses. Muñoz noted that Chile would “never be in favor of

military or other intervention in Venezuela,” during a press conference, stating boldly that the South American nation “oppose[s] coups and the use of force,” a nod in acknowledgement at the past that this country is still trying to reconcile just decades after its’ peaceful transition to democracy.