
Tomic on Christian Democracy and the Left in Chile: A Comment

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It may be worth reminding readers of the October 1975 *Bulletin* who wrote the paper on the fall of Allende's government. For many years Frei and Tomic were the rival leaders of Chilean Christian Democracy, Frei more conservative than his colleague. In 1964 Tomic would have liked to be Presidential candidate, but Frei was elected by the Party and later, overwhelmingly, by more than 60 per cent of the voters. Tomic went to Washington as Ambassador, whence he returned in late 1968 in order to start his pre-candidature Presidential campaign for the 1970 Presidential elections. He sought 'Popular Unity': in his conception an alliance between Christian Democrats and the Communist and Socialist Parties led, indubitably, by the Christian Democrats, although this was spelled out with varying explicitness.

Frei had won in 1964 because he had obtained the unconditional support of the Conservatives and Liberal Parties of the Right, who were frightened stiff—and with reason—of a victory in the Presidential elections by Allende, then supported only by Communists and Socialists. Frei's campaign had been two-pronged: a virulent drive to inject fear of Allende and of communism among the masses, financed by local capital and donations from European Christian Democrats and from the CIA, while Tomic stumped the country in his support, talking of 'Revolution in Liberty'. The motivations of those who voted for Frei were far from homogeneous. In his first three years, Frei began to implement one of the many structural reforms in his programme: the Agrarian Reform, but by the end of 1968 this project was hampered by lack of funds and political support from above, combined with the open hostility of Frei's Minister of the Interior, Perez Zujovic. Over this and other issues—including the massacre by police of illegal squatters in the southern town of Puerto Montt in 1969—a small group of people left the party to form the MAPU (Movement for United Popular Action). Frei also incurred the wrath of the parties of the Right, despite economic policies which favoured local and foreign capital. These parties were convinced that they could win the 1970 election on their own under the leadership of Frei's predecessor, Jorge Alessandri, without the alliance with the Christian Democrats which

had kept Allende out in 1964. Frei would doubtless have liked to become President again, but he could not succeed himself under the Constitution, and he must have thought that if Alessandri won he would be able to return in 1976 in circumstances similar to those of 1964. He also had good reason to believe that Tomic would be the CD candidate in 1970, and he distrusted the latter's radicalism. A fierce debate developed among Christian Democrats, between advocates of unity with the Left (Tomic) and advocates of going it alone (*el camino propio*). The Christian Democrats may have been the largest party, but they could not win against the coalitions of Left and Right, and Frei must have known that to go it alone was to court almost inevitable defeat. In an impassioned speech to a national meeting of the Christian Democrat party in May 1969, Tomic said that "without Popular Unity (i.e. a coalition with the left) there is no Tomic candidature". Yet a short time later he accepted the candidature with a commitment to going it alone. Thus Frei's strategy must have been to ensure Tomic's humiliation and Alessandri's victory. It did not work: Allende won, by a hair's breadth, but he won.

Tomic says in his *Bulletin* article that the parties of Popular Unity could have agreed with the Christian Democrats on a "concrete strategy" without compromising their ideological position. If Popular Unity itself was plagued, as Tomic rightly points out, by internal tactical divisions (though they were more or less agreed on a final, though vague, objective) how could they have agreed on strategy with a party so different in its ultimate objectives? This is more than Utopian. For the politicians of the Left, the Christian Democrats wanted only to gain a foothold in government and restrain their programme's implementation. Frei's record was hardly a recommendation.

We have some examples of negotiation in Congress between the Allende government and the Christian Democrats. In mid-1972 CD Senator Tomas Páblo, President of the Senate, initiated talks on the limits to be placed on nationalization and on the organization of the industries in the nationalized sector. An agreement was reached, but the Frei faction contributed the votes essential to its defeat on the floor of the Senate. How

could the UP trust the Christian Democrats, when the most influential among them were determined to make the government fail?

The difference between the Christian Democrats and Popular Unity may not, it is true, be easily perceived from their electoral programmes: it appears that Tomic is right when he says that the overwhelming majority of Chileans in 1969 (or in 1964 and 1970 for that matter) voted for parties and candidates who announced their opposition to capitalism. But others will say, with equal conviction, that the overwhelming majority cast an anti-communist vote: for the balance of Christian Democrat votes could be interpreted either way. The best way to distinguish the UP from the CD is to ask "to whom will they make concessions?" The CD made an electoral pact with the right in 1964, and again in 1972 (by-elections and university elections) and 1973 (parliamentary elections). Tomic, however much he may protest, allowed himself to be used in 1970 in a tacitly pro-Alessandri strategem, which failed.

Finally, the Christian Democrat party connived in the coup of 1973: Frei seems to have been aware of the conspiracy, and in any case all the Christian Democrat deputies signed the Congressional resolution calling on the Armed Forces to intervene in September 1973. Tomic says that the Christian Democrats did offer to cooperate with Unidad Popular, but that their offer was ignored: maybe, but the basis of trust was not there, and he does not seem to be able to distinguish between negotiation concerning tactics by parties who agree on ultimate objectives, and negotiations between parties who agree on neither tactics nor objectives. The leaders of the UP coalition had good reason to believe that, whatever the Christian Democrats' verbal commitment to revolution, structural change and so on, they were not prepared, either ideologically or in practice, to engage in the inevitable confrontation which such processes implied. And, as I say, they distrusted Christian Democrat motives. To judge by their record, the dominant faction in the Christian Democrat party—the Frei faction—would have opposed such cooperation tooth and nail, and would have carried the majority of party members with it. Over and over again, in moments of crisis—such as in 1969 over the choice of electoral strategy—that faction has won the day in internal struggles. Tomic's group would have either had to leave the party or submit to the *freistas*. The weakness of any group which broke with the party was shown in the case of the MAPU in 1969, and again in 1971, when several of Tomic's supporters from 1969 did leave to form the Chris-

tian Left and to support UP: they were but a handful, and their departure scarcely affected the Christian Democrats' electoral strength.

Tomic claims to be a socialist. In 1972 the Christian Democrats proposed the Workers' Enterprise to replace Popular Unity's plans for keeping the Area of Social Property under the control of the state. This was roughly a copy of Yugoslav workers' enterprises and differed from the UP project not in participation in decision-making at the level of the enterprise—which UP implemented, often at its cost—but in reserving to the workers in many industries (not copper) control of the surplus produced by the enterprise. Now this may be a good idea in some situations, but in Chile it would have involved depriving the state of the resources necessary for effective planning, and above all would have conferred substantial power on a small group of workers in advanced industries. In that political situation, at that particular time, it was the diametrical opposite of a socialist proposal: it was a proposal designed to weaken the socialist impulses of the mass movement which was arising in support of revolutionary change. It also happens to be the case that the Christian Democrats had particular political strength in the advanced enterprises and would therefore have been able to wield substantial power under such an arrangement. Nevertheless, I personally believe that UP could have accepted this project for tactical reasons, since in the confused situation of the time it would not have been implemented, and once the dust had settled—if ever it did—it could have been revised.

Tomic speaks of Popular Unity's sectarianism, and its personal and political intolerance of Christian Democrats. Popular Unity allowed members of the Christian Democrat party to keep the middle and low level posts they had received from Frei's patronage throughout its period in office, although many of them did nothing at all except draw their pay cheques, and others worked actively against the government. Some were simply spies watching UP militants—who had absolutely no sense of secrecy or security—and passing information on to their party. He makes a completely mistaken analysis of the situation among the *campesinos*. He says that the Christian Democrat unions, Libertad and Triunfo *Campesino*, were notified after a short while that the UP government would only recognize their rights if they joined the Federation controlled by the Marxists. In point of fact the first decree of the new government in late 1971 was the creation of a National Campesino Council on which each rural organization would be represented. It so happened that more of these organiza-

tions were controlled by Christian Democrats than by the UP, and therefore they were in a majority. They promptly demanded complete control over agricultural policy, asking in effect to be allowed to use this Council as a warhorse against the UP, whatever its policies. The leadership of the Confederation of Asentados, created and controlled by the Christian Democrats and claiming to represent beneficiaries of the Agrarian Reform, conducted a virulent policy against the government which amounted to a campaign against the continuation and deepening of the process of redistribution of land. In the province of Colchagua, one of their leaders went around telling *asentamientos* not to sell potatoes to the government because they were to be sent to Cuba! Better to burn or bury them . . . The Christian Democratic unions opposed the change in arrangements for local Peasant Councils, which began to be elected by the rank and file rather than consisting of representatives of organizations. This innovation arose in Cautín in late 1970, and when the Christian Democrats perceived that they could not control an elected Council, they boycotted them instead. The UP parties followed suit. Finally, in 1971, *Triunfo*, the largest CD-controlled union, split, losing some of its membership to a newly-

created organization which sympathized with the MAPU and Christian Left.

There is little doubt in my mind that, if the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party, at least—not to speak of other parties on the Left—had reached some kind of political agreement during the 1960s, the Chilean people would have gained no miraculous salvation, but they would have been spared their present appalling fate. There is even less doubt in my mind that, if they do not now reach an agreement, the reign of terror to which that people are subjected will last that much longer, and the political situation arising once political freedoms are re-established will be more dangerous and unstable. On both these points I fully agree with Tomic.

The issue is not to allocate blame for the catastrophe, but to note how difficult it was for any of the parties involved to foresee the enormous risks they were running before it was too late. There is no point today in my expressing surprise at their lack of foresight; few social scientists¹ or anyone else predicted the total crisis toward which Chilean society was moving.

¹ An exception is James Petras, in the last paragraph of his *Politics and Social Forces in Chilean Development*, University of California Press, 1969.