
Reflections on the Coup d'Etat in Chile

Radomiro Tomić

The March, 1973, election closed the door to the possibility of deposing President Allende constitutionally, in that the government increased its parliamentary base, even though it obtained only 44 per cent of the national vote.

The opposition in general, and the National Party together with the pro-fascist sectors of the ultra right in particular, opted for a strategy of illegality and terrorist violence, in an attempt to face public opinion, and the Armed Forces, with a dilemma: anarchism or dictatorship. Helped by the strategy of the ultra left, which was seeking to create an autonomous popular power base, the direct expression of the workers, the opposition reckoned it would take no more than six months to bring about the institutional paralysis of the State, the undermining of public order and security, and a schism within the Popular Unity government.

The imminence of a coup d'etat became the dominant feature of daily life from August, 1973, onwards. On 11th September, the Chilean road to socialism came to an end, tragically symbolised by the death of Salvador Allende in the flames of the presidential palace, bombed by the Air Force. Only five hours were needed for the uprising to reduce to dust the power structures of the government, of the Popular Unity party, of the Marxist parties and their extensive trade union base, developed for more than 40 years. How can this paralysis of the 1,630,000 Chileans who had voted for the Popular Unity parties just six months before be explained? Was it the lack both of the will to fight and of the plans that were required to hold on, if only for a few days, giving breathing space which might have enabled them to launch a political counter-attack, both internally and internationally?

The military have declared that they expected it would take them five days to gain control of Santiago and eight days for the industrial zone of Concepción, "making use of all the available fire power."

Instead, the collapse occurred in a few hours. In the Moneda itself, only Allende and 23 of his personal guards put up a defence. Over the whole country, military and police losses, according to the White Book, amounted to only 44, without

a tank or plane destroyed, and with just one helicopter damaged.

The facts are clear, but the same cannot be said of their interpretation. The government and the Popular Unity could have resisted—they did not. Why? Now we know that they had never decided what the government would do in the face of an Army uprising, and that they had neither the necessary arms nor adequate plans to resist. But for a full explanation we need to look further. With the opposition in control of the majority of the State organs, the President, as the bearer of Executive Power, had lost control of the nation and government action became spasmodic and incoherent. The imminence of a coup d'etat exacerbated in turn the clash within the UP between the 'constitutionalists' and those who proposed popular mobilization and civil war as the only way of dealing with a military coup.

The truth is that the fate of the Chilean constitutional system had been sealed with the failure at the beginning of August, of the 'dialogue' between the Christian Democrats and the government, and with the resignation in the same month of the four Commanders-in-Chief—of the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and the Military Police—from their ministerial posts. The terms of General Prat's resignation—exemplary Chilean and soldier—did not allow for any illusions. "The support of the majority of the Corps of Generals having been withdrawn from me, my continuation in the posts I presently hold would divide the Army . . .".

But a more fundamental question persists: was the Chilean road to socialism ever possible, or was it always condemned to fail? In other words, did Allende have a real possibility of constituting a government capable of carrying out his programme, on the basis of a solid majority at the constitutional level, as well as among the public? An objective evaluation of the Chilean situation in 1970 in the context of the social and political evolution of the country during the previous ten years, suggests that the answer is yes: Allende and the Popular Unity party did have a chance to constitute that double majority—institutional and popular—which was essential to the success of the Chilean road to socialism.

The key factor was, without any doubt, internal developments within the Christian Democrat

party, where, from 1963 onwards, an increasingly strong current was flowing in favour of some form of co-operation between the anti-capitalist Christian forces and those of a lay and a Marxist inspiration. The idea was not to enter into any ideological transactions, which would have been impossible, but to agree on a concrete strategy. The 'social and political unity of the people' was for the Christian Democrats, as early as 1969, the indispensable condition for getting a government capable of solving the real problems of the country, and at the same time avoiding the clear danger of institutional disintegration. The presidential programme of the Christian Democrats and the whole electoral campaign was based on this central theme: the necessity of a concrete and far-reaching agreement between the Christian Democratic Party, the Marxist Parties and the left wing of the Radical Party.

There was in 1970, and at least until July, 1971, a real basis for the formation of a powerful social movement, which would have included the overriding institutional and popular majority directed towards the democratic transformation of Chilean

society in a socialist direction. This would not by itself ensure that interests that would have been damaged by such a government would not attempt its violent overthrow; but the military uprising would have been confronted, in that case, by a radically different combination of social and institutional power from what existed on 11th September, 1973.

For such a wide-based consensus to be created, however, it was indispensable to make it clear that this was not just a tactical resource to drag into the dictatorship of the proletariat those who did not accept it in principle, nor believed it was necessary in order to advance towards effective socialist forms.

This was certainly the central question. And it will be again when the present dictatorship disintegrates, corroded by the essential irrationality of a scheme which attempts to impose capitalism under the cover of a sub-machine gun and by the magnitude both of its failures and of the sufferings it has already imposed on the workers and the Chilean people in general.