

Chile Calls the Military

For the second time in three months, President Salvador Allende has called high-ranking military officers into the Government of Chile in an effort to quell public opposition to his policies. He has placed an Air Force general in charge of the distribution of food and other essential consumer goods, assisted by three Army officers and a Navy captain.

Dr. Allende turned to the military after opposition forces had charged that the rationing of thirty basic foods in a drive against shortages, hoarding and a flourishing black market would be administered in a partisan manner. The opposition, which had been threatening active resistance to the austerity program, now says it will cooperate with the nonpolitical military men.

By way of restoring order after nearly a month of strikes and demonstrations for and against the Government, Dr. Allende in November appointed the Army commander Minister of the Interior, an Air Force general Minister for Mining and an admiral Public Works Minister. An officer in any Chilean cabinet is a rarity; for a Marxist President to name three at once occasioned great surprise, some of it inside his Popular Unity coalition.

This reliance on the military was dramatized when the Army chief, General Carlos Prats, served as head of Government during Dr. Allende's trip to the United Nations and Russia. Now the President has expanded that reliance despite a cry of alarm from the Revolutionary Left Movement (M.I.R.), farthest left of Chile's political forces, which nominally backs the Government.

As he said frankly during the autumn crisis, Dr. Allende fears a drift to civil war in an increasingly polarized Chile. By calling military leaders to high administrative positions he may be able to minimize that danger while mitigating opposition to unpalatable measures necessitated by a rapid deterioration of the Chilean economy, of which food shortages are only one aspect.

Chilean democrats must hope, however, that these extraordinary uses of high-ranking officers will be only a stopgap measure to insure fair distribution of scarce food and to allow a political cooling-off before the Congressional elections in March. The officers cannot serve a highly controversial Government indefinitely without risking sofe of the onus for policies that go badly. And any politicizing of the military could be disastrous for Chile's durable democratic system, a rarity in Latin America.