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Pinochet Rules With Eye to Image Abroad

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Despite rumors of internal armed forces opposition, Chilean President Augusto Pinochet seems as firmly in power as ever.

But there are signs that the virulently anti-Communist army general is more concerned about Chile's image abroad. Recent government moves could indicate a slight letup in the violent persecution of real and imagined leftists which has characterized the government since a 1973 coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende, a Marxist.

There is debate, however, over whether these measures represent meaningful changes or are just window dressing to impress foreigners.

Stories came out a few weeks ago in the British press to the effect that a group of Chilean military leaders were upset about Pinochet's personal style in office and had given him an ultimatum either to tone down his rabid anti-Communism or leave office by March.

The junta, which Pinochet heads, consisting of the heads of the navy, the air force and the national police,

dismissed the "ultimatum" stories as lies and nonsense. In fact, foreign diplomats and resident foreign correspondents have been unable to come up with any evidence that such a document existed.

The junta members then convoked a military "act of loyalty," with 8,000 troops present. The purpose, they said, was to "show Chile and the world the iron-like unity which reigns in our ranks."

While all this was going on, however, the government took other measures that could indicate the junta wants to loosen up a bit on its hardline approach. For example:

— Pinochet earlier had ordered the disbanding of an organization called the Peace Committee, which was backed by several churches and defended the rights of political prisoners. After the Peace Committee folded, the Catholic Church here set up a new group to continue its work. This organization reached full operational strength this month, and so far the junta has left it alone.

— The government released several Peace Committee press and lawyers who had been in jail since last year.

— The junta finally gave safe-conduct passes out of the

country to more than a dozen leftists who had been holed up for months in various foreign embassies in Santiago. Among them was Andres Pascal Allende, nephew of the late president and a leader of the underground Revolutionary Leftist Movement.

— Military authorities allowed a 65-page declaration by former President Eduardo Frei, a highly popular Christian Democrat who preceded Allende, to appear in print. Frei was critical of the junta and its policies.

— The government stood by a military court ruling that returned to the air Radio Balmaceda, a Santiago radio station which belongs to Christian Democrats (the biggest party before politics was suspended by the junta). The military commander of the Santiago zone earlier had shut down the station because it broadcast stories about political prisoners and other sensitive issues.

— Pinochet signed a decree calling for medical examination of political prisoners, written search warrants for police raids and stricter record-keeping at jails. The new decree also

allows the justice minister and the chief justice of the supreme court to inspect jails where violations of the law are suspected.

— The government did not censor stories about the U.N. Human Rights Commission's current report on torture in Chile.

Foreign observers here say it makes sense for Pinochet to try to present an image of internal harmony and political moderation now. Chile, in economic crisis, needs World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank loans. It also needs a good name among countries it owes money, because it may have to reschedule its foreign debt again.

Chile's reputation in the United Nations, Europe and the United States is at an all-time low. The U.N. Human Rights Commission report, which was released this week in Geneva, concluded that torture of political prisoners has become institutionalized in Chile and that torture methods here are so brutal "they exceed the imagination."

The junta's severest critics, principally civil rights lawyers working with political

prisoners, are extremely skeptical about the recent seeming liberalization. They contend these measures are superficial and designed to mislead foreigners.

These lawyers claim that previous decrees guaranteeing certain basic rights to prisoners, which also looked good on paper, have been ignored in practice. They say torture has not dropped off. They say that people suspected of leftist sympathies still are "disappearing" with no legal record of arrest. They say that the 4,000 to 4,500 political prisoners are not getting adequate food and that their health conditions are appalling. But within Chile, even supporters of the junta are saying now that there should be real change in human rights policy, because this would be in Chile's long-term interests. A series of such recommendations appeared, surprisingly, this week in *Que Pasa*, a magazine backed by rightist business interests which had been pressing for the military coup against Allende long before it actually happened. "Chile is becoming isolated," the magazine said critically.