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Lately, It Changed

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Chile's Political Past Had Been Peaceful

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During a decade of profound shifts in government, until now always by constitutional means Chile has proved itself the most intensely political nation of the Western hemisphere.

Whatever problems the country faced, and its absurd geography alone provided quite a few, were considered susceptible to political solutions. The parties took up positions and put the issue to the voters in the next election.

Chileans were thus forever voting. The fever of campaign scarcely diminished in between. In Santiago, even the sewing circles are ideological. School children elect May queens along party lines.

The language of debate was often strident, but the political game was always played peacefully, and according to the constitution. Only the military, and some of the peasantry, failed to participate.

Lately, though, problems persisted even after a majority, or at least a clear plurality, "solved" them by voting one way or the other in Congress.

Change took a radical turn. A mildly reformist government gave way in 1964 to the "Revolution in Liberty" of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei. Six years later, the voters cast that approach aside in favor of Salvador Allende's Marxist road to socialism.

Frei's Christian Democratic government had no precedent in this hemisphere. It was far more socially reformist that Christian Democratic governments found elsewhere. The democratic election of a Marxist president was unknown anywhere before Allende.

Both approaches were intently followed by other Latin Americans looking for a way out of what most feel are intolerable conditions of underdevelopment. Chile, with but 9.3 million people, could not aspire to leadership of 250 million Latin Americans. But Latin Americans did look to Chile for innovation and experimentation.

With Allende, Chile dared to try the approach to economic and social organization that had fascinated academic and prior Marxists around the hemisphere for years.

Only in Chile were Marxist parties viable, dynamic political forces. The Communists participated briefly in a government in the '40s. They had a reputation for loyalty to Soviet dogma, and a talent for organizing at the grass roots. In recent elections, they gathered around 16 per cent of the total vote.

The Socialist Party, of which Allende was a founder in 1933, often took positions far to the left of the Communists. Though Allende's wing of the faction-ridden party favored a constitutional road to socialism, another favored arming the militants for a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Other parties in Allende's six-member coalition, whether professedly Marxist or not, accepted for the 1970 election such planks as: nationalization of foreign copper and other mineral holdings, replacement of the bicameral Congress with a "people's assembly" including labor union representation, sweeping redistribution of income, and institution of expensive social welfare programs.

The largest single party, the Christian Democrats, had begun programs nearly as broad between 1964 and 1970: an agrarian reform to eliminate big land holdings, a start at state takeover of the key copper sector that was then totally foreign-owned, formation of pressure groups among mothers and slumdwellers, organization of the peasants.

But the absolute majority that voted Frei into office soon showed — in by-elections — a resurging discontent. For the fateful 1970 presidential election, the party chose one-time ambassador to Washington Radomiro Tomic as its candidate.

Tomic's platform was cast far to the left of Frei's, to the point that it closely resembled that of Allende. Conservatives who often referred to Frei as "Chile's Kerensky" found Tomic unacceptable.

Polarization of the once astonishingly diverse electorate had begun. The conservative National Party, that had virtually disappeared, supported aging former President Jorge Alessandri. He came within two percentage points of defeating Allende in the three-way race.

Most political scientists who know Chile well attribute its lively political history in part to its odd geography.

The country is 2,000 miles long and rarely 100 miles wide, strung down the Andes mountain chain. Most of the north is too dry—a desert for habitation. Most of the far south is too wet.

But the moderate center has as many physical attractions as California—vineyards, waterfalls, and always the arresting Andes. First nitrate and then copper made many foreigners and upper class Chileans rich when the international price was right. When it dipped, the economy turned direly ill.

Earthquakes, mudslides and droughts added their own tremors to what a top Chilean economist, Anibal Pinto, has called "the difficult economy."

When the highly politicized labor movement added its pressures, Chile became known as "the land of a thousand strikes." The polarization accelerated by Allende brought confrontation politics to the compromise approach that had been the Chilean way. This, too, affected the performance of the economy.

The question arose of whether enough Chileans could work together long enough hours to make the economy operate—even if the ever more elusive goal of political consensus were achieved.