

Off Course in Chile

Despite their tradition of noninvolvement in politics, Chile's armed forces are apparently following the dismally familiar pattern of other military dictatorships since their violent overthrow of President Allende. They have even added a few distinct—and distinctly unsavory—trappings of their own. While the reports of large-scale executions of alleged leftists may not be true, the junta's avowed aim to return Chile to peaceful, constitutional government sounds more hollow with every passing day.

The junta has not only outlawed all Marxist parties in a country where these groups commanded nearly 44 per cent of the votes in congressional elections last March, but has suspended all other political parties and dissolved the freely elected Congress.

It has carried out a public burning of books, periodicals and documents of all kinds on a scale seldom seen since the heyday of Hitler, evidently in the naive belief that this crude operation would—in the words of one of the ruling generals—help “extirpate the Marxist cancer from Chile.”

Perhaps even more ominous for the long haul in Chile, General Gustavo Leigh, commander of the Air Force and one of four junta leaders, indicates that a new constitution is being prepared which will broaden the role of the armed forces and give them “representation in legislative bodies.” He has added that there will be no popular referendum on the constitution.

There may be countries where the military could impose such a system. Chile, with its democratic tradition and political sophistication, is not one of them.

If the military leaders had evidence of Cuban and North Korean involvement in arming and training Chilean guerrillas, it is not surprising that they would immediately break relations with those two Communist regimes. That, however, is quite a different thing from trying to “extirpate” the Marxist idea by force.

It may have been expected that the military regime should return to their owners and managers those Chilean enterprises “intervened” by the Allende Government through illegal or underhanded means. But they must know that they cannot turn the clock back in a country that was headed for moderate socialism and national ownership of its natural resources long before Dr. Allende came to power.

Furthermore, to keep 7,000 persons, Chilean and foreign, confined in the national stadium in Santiago two weeks after the coup is an inhumane act that only invites the condemnation it is receiving around the world.

The junta needs all the help it can get if it is to avert civil war, pacify the country and create the conditions for political and economic recovery. It will not get that help if it persists along the sterile if familiar path of military dictatorship in what was one of the Americas' few remaining strongholds of democracy.