

January 5, 2012 5:18 pm

Chile axes 'dictatorship' from school books

By Jude Webber in Buenos Aires

Critics have denounced as historical revisionism a decision by Chile's centre-right government to scrub the term "dictatorship" from primary school textbooks in reference to the rule of the General Augusto Pinochet.

The 1973-1990 period will be described as a "military regime" – a phrase Harald Beyer, Chile's education minister, says is a more general description.

The decision goes beyond semantics and is likely to reopen wounds of the darkest chapter in Chile's modern history in which 3,000 people are officially reported to have disappeared or been killed and nearly 30,000 tortured.

"In Chile, there is still a very large group in society which does not criticise what happened [under Pinochet]," said Ricardo Brodsky Baudet, director of the Museum of Memory. Some Chileans believe Pinochet's handover of power to a democratic government in 1990 proves his was not a dictatorship.

"'Military regime' is a euphemism which hides something relevant: the dictatorship in Chile began as a military junta but over time became a military-civilian regime," Mr Brodsky Baudet added.

Opposition parliamentarians, including Isabel Allende, whose father Salvador was the Marxist president killed in the 1973 coup that brought Pinochet to power, described the decision as a scandal.

Gabriel Silber, an opposition deputy and member of a parliamentary education commission, said words ended up "installing realities" and it was particularly important for young people who did not live through the dictatorship. "We can't have two readings of history," he said.

The controversy is a blow to Sebastián Piñera, the unpopular billionaire businessman president who took power in 2010 as the first elected leader from the right in more than half a century. He is embroiled in a dispute with students over higher education, while his approval ratings stand at 33-34 per cent, according to polls this week.

"This is a huge embarrassment for the government and such a self-inflicted wound," said Patricio Navia, a New York University professor and political commentator. He said he expected the government to try to ride out the storm but to end up having to backtrack.

The government has played down the controversy and Mr Beyer says he has no problem recognising that Pinochet's was "a dictatorial government".

Though himself a liberal centrist, Mr Piñera reshuffled his cabinet last year and gave greater political prominence to the UDI, the more rightwing of the two parties in his coalition.

But even the other party, RN, criticised the linguistic shift. "Let's leave history to the historians," said Manuel José Ossandón, deputy RN party president. "If my father had been detained and disappeared, this change would be an insult to me."

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