

US Newsstream

World News: Chile Protesters' Grievances Grow, Rattling Government

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SANTIAGO, Chile – The rise in the subway fare was small, Natalia Cortez said, but came on top of what she called other indignities: shoddy schools and meager pensions, rising prices and a low minimum wage. So, she has been among hundreds of thousands of protesters surging into the streets for days to shake President Sebastian Pinera's center-right government.

"We're all living in debt," said the 28-year-old teacher. "We have to pay higher electricity bills, water bills, all the services. And we just don't make enough."

What began as students hopping turnstiles over a 3.7% increase in subway fares has morphed into mass protests about an array of grievances, culminating in a demonstration Friday that drew more than a million people into the streets of this capital and brought the government closer to a reckoning.

Looters have destroyed hundreds of shops and 20 people have been killed. The state human rights institute has criticized the security forces for using excessive force in street battles.

Chileans aren't clamoring for a revolution, political analysts and many protesters here say, but they are demanding broad change. The protests represent the greatest challenge to a Chilean government since dictator Augusto Pinochet faced demonstrations and a referendum that ended his regime nearly 30 years ago.

Discontent against the Latin American establishment and ruling elites has flared in recent weeks: Upheaval has hit Ecuador and Honduras, with protesters demanding the presidents in those countries resign.

On the surface, Chile looks like the last Latin American country that would be hit by mass unrest.

The middle class in this country of 17 million has expanded. The capital is a showcase of parks, broad avenues, shiny skyscrapers and Latin America's most modern metro. But the slow economic growth that resulted from the end of the commodity boom coupled with income inequality have brought into relief the precarious nature of middle-class life.

"These are not protests over hunger, these are protests about the aspirations of a middle class," said **Patricio Navia**, who teaches Latin American politics at New York University.

Arturo Erazo, 49, watched on Friday night as militarized police fired tear gas 200 feet from the musical-instruments store he owns, while young men responded with a hail of rocks. He didn't have much patience for the protesters.

"In this country there are opportunities," he said. "The problem is people don't take advantage."

But Mr. Erazo acknowledged the shortfalls that have animated the demonstrations -- not just the difficulty in getting by but the disconnect between Mr. Pinera, one of Chile's wealthier entrepreneurs, and the people he governs. The president's comment early in the protests that his government was "at war" had led to widespread derision.

On Saturday, he announced he would reshuffle his cabinet to quell the protests. He earlier pledged to boost the monthly minimum wage, raise pensions for the poorest and boost taxes on upper-class wage earners. The subway-fare increase has been rescinded.

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Maolis Castro contributed to this article.

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