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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Chile is preparing to rewrite its constitution. Why are people still protesting?

By **Rachelle Krygier**

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When ordinarily stable Chile became the latest Latin American nation to erupt in violent protest in October, President Sebastián Piñera began offering concessions: suspending subway rate increases, raising pensions, reshuffling his cabinet, agreeing to a rewrite of the dictatorship-era constitution.

But while those steps calmed the protests over inequality and cost-of-living pressures that left at least 20 dead and 2,500 wounded, hundreds of mostly young people are still demonstrating weekly, and clashing with security forces — with sometimes deadly results.

A group of people leaving a soccer game in Santiago on Tuesday threw rocks at police, a target of the protesters' ire since the October demonstrations. A police vehicle ran over and killed a 37-year-old man. Video of the incident provoked public outrage; soccer fans called for protests on Friday. On Thursday, a 22-year-old protester was struck and killed by a public bus.

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The new constitution is expected to tackle at least some of the concerns that brought people to the streets in the first place, including government recognition of health care and education as basic human rights. Yet the still-unwritten document won't be submitted for approval until late 2021, and analysts question whether the government can afford the new public spending that might be required.

"The constitution has become some sort of panacea," said Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist who teaches at New York University. "People think that with a new one, all the problems of Chile will be resolved and quality of life will improve. There's a problem of excessive expectations that is set to become a big challenge for the country in the future."

Pínera's popularity has fallen to single digits, students are planning larger demonstrations for March, and those in the streets say they don't expect the new constitution to address their concerns, which range from higher pensions and free education to the removal of the center-right president and the end of capitalism.

Chile's Congress is discussing rules for an April plebiscite in which voters will choose whether and how to rewrite the constitution drafted under Augusto Pinochet in 1980. Opinion polls show that a rewrite will almost certainly be approved. Elections would be held in October for a constitutional assembly that would begin working in November. Members would have a year to draft a document to be submitted to a national vote.

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“I feel like the discussion has been centered on procedures and methods and we haven’t discussed the issues that really matter,” Piñera told an audience of business leaders on Wednesday. “We don’t know how what started on October 18 will end. There are two paths: One is violence, and the other is to attentively compile all of the voices and respond respecting the rule of law without sacrificing our ability to grow.”

One question generating debate is whether the constitutional assembly should have gender parity. Chile’s feminist movement, one of the most active sectors in demonstrations since October, is pushing not only for parity in the assembly but for gender equality to be enshrined in the new constitution.

The pace of the process is likely to prolong political instability, which could have an effect on domestic and foreign investment. The government has cut growth projections for 2020 from 2.3 percent to 1 to 1.5 percent because of the “violence, looting and destruction that have halted the economy,” Finance Minister Ignacio Briones said in December.

Students forced the suspension of the PSU, Chile’s SATs, at multiple locations, and dozens were detained this week for again demonstrating against the college admission test. Protesters say public universities should accept a diverse pool of applicants, rather than relying on the results of tests that they consider part of an “elitist system.”

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Students continue to accuse the government of human rights violations and police repression. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported cases of abuse of power and torture by security forces in October. A senator has sued Piñera in Chilean courts for alleged crimes against humanity; the Communist Party says it will sue him in the International Criminal Court.

A recent survey by the University of Chile indicates that the current protests, while smaller than in October, represent a diverse population. The average age is 33, and 32 percent have a college degree. A separate poll by the Santiago-based Center of Public Studies indicates that more than 55 percent of Chileans support the continuing protests.

The constitution has been rewritten several times, but the current process is the first time since Pinochet that a completely new document might be written. It's also the first time that the people will decide who will write it and how — previous rewrites were initiated by politicians to reward allies.

“One of the main challenges, inequality, won't be solved with simply approving a new constitution,” said Pablo Villoch, who teaches leadership and conflict at Chile's Andrés Bello and Catholic universities. “But I think this is a historic opportunity to get closer to a system that is more socially cohesive.”

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“The country has understood that the three decades of neoliberal experiment have ended and a new era in Chile’s history has begun, one of advancing towards a more conscious and socially inclusive model,” he continued.

Others are less optimistic.

“Right now, Piñera is toast,” said Navia, the NYU professor. “The left hates him, and the right thinks he gave the left too many concessions. The risk for the country and for Latin America in general is that the demands to reduce inequality could end up bringing more political instability and authoritarianism, and less growth.”

Navia said Chile today reminds him of Venezuela 30 years ago, when it was considered the most stable democracy in the region but had not yet adequately addressed inequality, corruption and dependence on a single commodity (oil in Venezuela; copper in Chile).

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In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez stepped in, establishing a socialist government that initially raised living standards for some poor, but ultimately presided over the country's historic economic collapse, including the devastation of its oil industry and the exodus of millions from the country.

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