



What You Need to Know About the Unrest in Chile

One of Latin America's most prosperous and politically stable countries is being rocked by protests and looting amid a reckoning over inequality.

By **Ernesto Londoño**

Oct. 21, 2019, 6:37 p.m. ET

Over the weekend, a wave of protests in Chile set off by an increase in subway fares deteriorated into widespread looting, vandalism and arson.

President Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency, imposed curfews and ordered the armed forces to restore order — measures that were jarring for Chileans who lived through a repressive period of military rule in the 1970s and 1980s.

The scenes of mob violence were striking in a country that has long been regarded as an exemplar of economic and political stability in a turbulent region.

Here is what you need to know to understand what led to this crisis.

How did this start?

A modest subway fare increase that started on Oct. 6 led high school students to jump turnstiles at metro stations in Santiago, the capital, earlier this month. They promoted it as an act of civil disobedience using the hashtag #EvasionMasiva, or “Mass Evasion,” on social media.

As fare dodging became rampant, some metro stations closed and police cracked down violently on passengers who had jumped over turnstiles.

That was the catalyst for large street protests that soon became about much more than the cost of riding the subway.

Many poor and middle class Chileans said they were fed up with the rising cost of utilities, stagnant wages and paltry pensions in a nation that has long heralded itself as well-run and prosperous.

If the economy is growing, why are Chileans mad?

Chile's economy has been rattled this year by global trade tensions, a fall in the price of copper (its main export), and rising oil prices. But it has grown at a reasonably healthy rate and is in far better shape than the economies of some of its neighbors.

Yet, inequality remains deeply entrenched in Chile. And many Chileans feel left behind as they take on debt to get through the month and struggle to plan for retirement.

Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist who teaches at New York University, said many middle class Chileans feel “abandoned” by Mr. Piñera's government. The billionaire president has pushed reforms that lower taxes on the wealthiest in an effort to attract investment and boost growth.

“That has created the impression that this government is far more concerned about the rich than people of lower income,” Mr. Navia said.

Recent corruption cases involving powerful businessmen and Chile's federal police force have been a major source of outrage. And many Chileans reacted with indignation when Mr. Piñera was issued a fine in August for dodging property taxes on an estate he has owned for years.

What do the protesters want?

What began as an act of civil disobedience led by students has turned into a broad reckoning about inequality, Chile's economic policies under its center-right government and the aspirations of Chileans.

Chileans who have faced off with police, and those who have beat pots and pans at home and on the streets in a show of solidarity, complain about low wages, paltry pensions and ever more expensive transportation and utility costs.

Monica de Bolle, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said several countries in Latin America failed to take advantage of the commodities boom that lifted millions out of poverty in Latin America at the turn of the century.

Leaders, she said, could have spent more to expand access to education, improve infrastructure and boost social services — measures that would have left countries better prepared for an economic downturn.

“Many people in these countries have seen a whiff of what it's like to have a better life,” she said. While Chile has done more than others in the region to plan for leaner times, Ms. de Bolle added, “It's not enough for what people aspire to.”

What has the government's response been?

As looting and vandalism spread briskly on Friday, a startled Mr. Piñera declared a state of emergency at midnight and put the military in charge of reimposing order. That was an extraordinary step in a country where the military had killed and tortured thousands of people just decades ago in the name of restoring order.

The government scrapped the subway fare increase, and Mr. Piñera said that he is mindful of the broader grievances that fueled the unrest. But the president has yet to outline a comprehensive set of policies.

Mr. Piñera has expressed a willingness to meet with opposition leaders, some of whom have argued that deep structural reforms are needed. But he seemed to have difficulty coming to grips with the real source of the population's frustrations. He blamed organized criminal groups for the violence.

Mr. Piñera declared Sunday night, “We are at war against a powerful enemy who is willing to use violence without any limits.”

But the general charged with restoring order, Javier Iturriaga, struck a very different tone.

“I am a happy man,” he said. “I am not at war with anyone.”

John Polga-Hecimovich, a Latin America expert at the United States Naval Academy, said Mr. Piñera had been “surprisingly inept at recognizing and responding to the initial protests.”

Mr. Polga-Hecimovich said the unrest in Chile and similar crises that have rattled the region in recent months should put political elites on notice.

“This might just be the wake-up call some of these governments and political parties need to improve their representation and governance,” he said.

Ernesto Londoño is the Brazil bureau chief, based in Rio de Janeiro. He was previously an editorial writer and, before joining The Times in 2014, reported for The Washington Post. @londonoe · Facebook

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

As a subscriber, you make it possible for us to tell stories that matter.

Help more readers discover our journalism — give a subscription to The Times as a gift.

Subscribers can purchase gifts at a 50% discount.

Give The Times