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# Chilean Protesters Burn Churches, Loot Stores Ahead of Constitutional Referendum; Thousands of people gathered in Santiago on anniversary of last year's antigovernment demonstrations

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Protesters in Chile's capital torched two churches, looted stores and clashed with police in a spasm of violence a week before a referendum on whether to ditch a dictatorship-era constitution .

Television images from Santiago on Sunday showed masked protesters filming with their smartphones and cheering as the spire of the burning La Asunción church crashed to the ground. Demonstrators also set fire to San Francisco Borja church, which dates from the mid-19th century.

The city's archbishop and the government of President Sebastián Piñera condemned the attacks, which also included the looting of a supermarket and other stores.

"This is an expression of brutality," said Interior Minister Víctor Pérez, who added that police were deployed to protect Santiago's subway, a frequent target of vandalism. "Today we must lament the violent acts, but we will confront them."

Marking the anniversary of the start of last year's mass antigovernment protests , about 25,000 people, some holding large banners calling for a new constitution, congregated Sunday in Plaza Italia. The square was the focal point of last year's protests, which threw one of Latin America's most stable and prosperous nations into disarray, leading to more than 30 deaths and billions of dollars in damage as hotels and supermarkets were trashed nationwide.

They also prompted concessions from the government , including an announcement by Mr. Piñera, a conservative, of plans to write a new constitution.

The demonstrations began when high-school students upset over a small subway-fare increase rushed subway stations and took to the streets. That quickly morphed into far larger protests in which hundreds of thousands of Chileans conveyed their discontent over poor health care, small pensions and economic inequality despite years of robust growth and declines in poverty.

The demonstrations tended to be peaceful during the day before descending after dark into violent clashes between groups of young men and militarized police, who have been accused by human rights organizations of committing abuses.

The referendum to replace Chile's 1980 constitution, written during the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, has fueled investor uncertainty. That constitution was credited with laying the foundations for Chile's robust growth, which attracted foreign investors, but faulted for not offering a social safety net to ordinary Chileans.

The referendum was initially scheduled for April, but it was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic, which has infected more than 490,000 people in Chile. If it passes next Sunday, Chile will begin a two-year process of writing a new constitution.

Protesters and police had clashed in recent days as Chileans emerged from a lockdown imposed because of the pandemic. In one incident, prosecutors said a police officer pushed a 16-year-old demonstrator from a bridge, injuring him. The officer was arrested and faces charges.

**Patricio Navia**, a Chilean political scientist at New York University, said violent clashes like the one on Sunday are unlikely to ease anytime soon.

"The precedent has been set. I don't expect that to go away," he said. "It is going to be a permanent feature in Chilean politics now."

Maolis Castro in Santiago, Chile, contributed to this article.

Write to Ryan Dube at [ryan.dube@dowjones.com](mailto:ryan.dube@dowjones.com)

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