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Nota de Archivo: *Summary: This report assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the political parties in Chile as the 1970 election loomed. It concluded that Alessandri's ascent could easily be reversed and that the political situation was very fluid. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 128, Country Files, Latin America, Chile Wrap-Up. Secret.*

Presidential Politics in Chile: Waiting for Don Jorge?

In this memorandum we examine political developments in Chile over the past year and speculate about their implications for the September 1970 presidential election. For some years the electorate in Chile appeared to have been moving steadily to the left and in the 1964 presidential election nearly all the votes were garnered by the victorious Christian Democrats or by the coalition of Socialists and Communists. Nonetheless, the most striking and possibly the most important political development in the past year has been the extraordinary rise in popularity of a decidedly right-of-center figure, former President Jorge Alessandri. Apparently, despite the social advances made under President Frei's "Revolution in Liberty," much of the polity has chafed under it. Some, including a significant group from Frei's party, want more emphasis on "Revolution;" others want instead more stress on "Liberty"—that is, liberty from social change and political turbulence. The latter are gravitating toward Alessandri, who is looked upon as a sort of political patrón who can "get things done" without turmoil. Of course, anything can happen between now and the casting of ballots in September 1970, but for the moment the political health of the 73-year-old Don Jorge stands out in sharp contrast to the political ailments of the various leftist parties.

1. Chile has always presented something of a paradox. It is famed for its democratic institutions, political stability, and apolitical military. Its ideologically based parties are more like those in Europe than the personalistic vehicles that abound in most other Latin American countries. It can boast of a number of economic and political institutes that have contributed outstanding international civil servants to the UN and the OAS. Data on the social and economic ills of Chile have been systematically collected for years (cost of living indexes were being kept as far back as 1913), and major problems have been repeatedly analyzed. Yet solutions to most of these problems have not resulted: distribution of land and personal income remains inequitable, agricultural productivity remains low, and inflation is still chronic.

2. It has long been accepted as a truism that the Chileans have become increasingly impatient with these conditions and that the electorate has steadily been turning to the left. The victory in 1964 of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei and his efforts to initiate a "Revolution in Liberty" brought about some important social changes. His government has made a significant start in carrying out an agrarian reform program, markedly expanding social services, and helping to bring about a large increase in the real income of the poorer classes. Yet as Frei's term approaches its end, the front runner for

the 1970 election is a decidedly right-of-center figure, the 73-year-old former President Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez.

The Redoubtable Don Jorge

3. When Alessandri was elected president in 1958, his victory was regarded by many to be the “last chance” of the traditional conservative elite to solve Chile’s recurring problems. Although 1958 marked the debut of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) under Frei in a presidential election, the real contest was between Alessandri, an industrialist and son of a former president, and Salvador Allende, the candidate of a strong alliance of Communists, Socialists, and other leftists—the Popular Action Front (FRAP). Winning slightly over one third of the vote, Alessandri barely defeated Allende while Frei placed third.

4. Remembrances of Don Jorge’s administration would hardly seem to explain the extent of his present popularity. A stout defender of the virtues of private enterprise, Alessandri initially made economic austerity his principal policy. A capable and honest administrator, he managed to raise taxes, lower expenses, and even balance the budget in 1959 (for the first time since his term as Minister of Finance in 1950). His regime on balance was a competent but not an inspiring one; it coped reasonably well with the emergency situations caused by a series of earthquakes and tidal waves that took thousands of lives and caused more than $200 million worth of damage in 1960. Although the economy expanded at the annual rate of about five percent a year, little was accomplished in the social field and the workers bore the brunt of the austerity program.

5. It is difficult moreover to imagine a candidate more antipático in the usual political sense. Alessandri, who compares himself with General de Gaulle, presents a cold aloof image and appears openly to disdain the people he once governed and would govern again. While a sympathetic biographer says that he is not oblivious to public demands, Alessandri has had as little contact with the masses as possible and eschews popular demonstrations. Stories of his parsimonious ways are legend; in contrast to his predecessors who entertained lavishly at La Moneda (the Chilean White House) Alessandri was said to have made his few guests feel that they had been invited to a fasting. Summing up the characteristics of the former president, the same biographer noted that his “stubbornness and conceit were outweighed by his sobriety and austerity.”

6. Yet apparently these rather forbidding personal qualities do have a strong appeal to many Chileans and have helped create Don Jorge’s remarkable popular following. Among his supporters are those who feel that Frei’s “Revolution in Liberty” has gone too fast and those who feel that it has not brought them any real increased benefits. The former include the business classes, traditional agricultural elites, and white collar workers; the latter encompass many lower income people in both the cities and the countryside. All look to Don Jorge as a man worthy of respect—a man above parties and politics, with links to no special interest, and above all someone who can “get things done” with a minimum of social turmoil. Most of his supporters seem to have forgotten the social torpor of the Alessandri years but remember the relative political calm. In evaluating his tenure, Alessandri was proudest of the fact that there were no “social disorders in my regime, no state of siege.”

7. Alessandri has made no strong efforts in recent months to warm up to voters or politicians. Having maintained a position of political independence, he has been assiduously courted by the rightwing National Party and rightwing elements from the heterogeneous Radical Party but has kept these suitors at arm’s length and made no firm political commitments. Nonetheless his campaign strategy seems especially geared to exploit their hopes. The former president has indicated that he will wage a “realistic campaign that does not make sweeping promises but concentrates on the day to day problems and bears in mind the country’s true economic capabilities.” Under the slogan of “Cosismo” (the ability to achieve) he means to show that his achievements will be small but constant, as opposed to large but unfulfilled promises. Furthermore he will pledge to curtail the influence of “all powerful and disruptive agencies with vaguely assigned responsibilities” (for that read land reform institutes and other social agencies sparked by the Christian Democrats). Alessandri’s platform finally

will emphasize efficiency not only of government agencies but of private industry as well. In this category, he promises to crack down on all corruption and bureaucratic fecklessness.

Healthy Candidate—Ailing Parties

8. Alessandri has to be considered the front runner, not only by his supporters but also by Christian Democrats, Socialists, Communists and Radicals who see the aging former chief executive in surprisingly good personal health and their own organizations politically ailing. Various political soundings including informal opinion polls have consistently shown Alessandri's popularity to be greater than any candidate of the other parties. The congressional election of 2 March 1969 furthermore showed that the promise of his return could breathe new life into the once moribund National Party. By huddling under his mantle the party of the traditional elites managed to increase its share of the vote from 14.3 percent in the 1967 municipal election to 20.0 percent, thereby emerging as the second largest party in the country. The personal impact of the former president on this victory was underscored by the extraordinary success of two National candidates for deputy—both of whom happen to bear the name Alessandri. In one district an Alessandri niece, Silvia, a housewife yanked from domestic obscurity, topped a field of 81 candidates including a PDC presidential hopeful. In another a nephew, Gustavo, amassed a substantial personal vote and also led the National Party ticket to significant gains.

9. The Alessandri surge has only exacerbated the ideological strains and factions within the PDC. The pro-government "oficialista" wing recognizes the trend toward a candidate who represents austerity and stability but it has been challenged on its left by the "rebeldes," some of the most articulate and innovative elements of the party. This loose faction, which included one of the original founders of the party, a principal ideologue, and several youth leaders, has felt that Frei's slowness in enacting reforms represents a capitulation to the forces of the right. They have charged the government with forsaking the old Christian Democratic objective of a "noncapitalist way of development," and deplored one repressive action in March 1969 when government security forces shot and killed squatters in the process of evicting them. Disputing the traditional policy of the PDC of avoiding electoral alliances, the rebeldes argued that the only way to defeat the right in 1970 is to form a pact with the Marxist parties or elements from them. The rebeldes received some support in this and other stands from yet a third group within the party, the "terceristas." This latter group is also disgruntled with the government's performance but is more willing to work with the party leadership.

10. Frei and the oficialista wing have managed to control the party's direction but not without fracturing party unity. The March election strengthened the oficialista position as candidates running on the government line generally did better than the rebeldes. At the subsequent National Convention in May the proposal of the Frei wing to run alone barely defeated the rebelde position of "popular unity" with the left. Nevertheless this victory cost the party its rebelde group, all of whom resigned or were subsequently purged. This faction has now formed its own electoral vehicle, the Action Movement for Popular Unity, and is currently working for the movement its name implies. Moreover "popular unity" still has some appeal within the tercerista faction and many continue to lobby for it within the old PDC.

The Maverick Role of Tomic

11. Indeed, the most significant proponent for "popular unity" also happens to be the PDC's most significant presidential hopeful, former ambassador to the US Radomiro Tomic. Of the various PDC figures, he commands the broadest support within the party and has long been considered the natural successor to Frei. Yet he is convinced that the PDC cannot go it alone in this election and that it must unite with the Communists and other members of the Marxist left if it is to have a prayer first of defeating Alessandri and second, once in office, of effecting social change. Entreaties to both the domestic Communists and the Soviets in his recent trip to Europe have been in vain but he continues to advocate a united left for the 1970 election. At the same time he has indicated that as a "disciplined PDC militant" he would submit to a party draft, apparently with or without such unity.

12. The politics of copper have further complicated the issues of Tomic' candidacy and the political fortune of the PDC. The government's announcement that it would pursue a policy of "negotiated nationalization," by buying up 51 percent of Anaconda Copper's holdings now and the remainder sometime after 1972, has been opposed by an alliance of the Communists, Socialists, dissident Christian Democrats, and the left leadership of the Radical Party. With the reluctant support of the Nationals, Frei has at present sufficient strength in Congress to block leftist bills calling for immediate nationalization. The president has also attempted to exploit this issue to widen the gap between the PDC and the Marxist parties.

13. In this endeavor, Frei has not yet succeeded in containing Radomiro Tomic. The former Ambassador is basically opposed to the copper accords and has espoused immediate nationalization. Although he continues to be the leading aspirant for the PDC nomination when the party convenes in August, differences within the party would be likely to hurt his electoral chances. Tomic and Frei have agreed not to air their differences publicly but others may not be so reticent. Tomic' advocacy of an agreement with the far left and by extension between the PDC and Communist labor organizations is likely to be rejected by the leftist parties and prove anathema to the PDC right. Some of the right and even the center of the party would probably turn to Alessandri if Tomic were the nominee.

Infighting on the Far Left

14. "Solidarity forever" is also far from being the theme of the parties on the Marxist left. While the Communist Party has been far too suspicious of Tomic to unite under his banner, it has also had its own difficulties in maintaining the formal unity of the FRAP. The party is quite conscious of Alessandri's drawing power and feels that he can be beaten only by an expansion of the FRAP, but such a movement is being jeopardized by its fractious partners, the Socialists. The Communists would like to include the left wing of the Radical Party in such a coalition but this inclusion is scorned by the Socialists who regard the Radicals as a "bourgeois" party.

15. The growing influence of the more militant revolutionaries in the Socialist Party could further complicate the prospect for electoral unity in 1970. A recently concluded party plenum conceded the impossibility of electing a Socialist president but urged that one be nominated to carry the revolutionary program to the people. While the Socialists have not rejected the concept of a popular front, they have demanded that all participants adhere to the Socialist platform and have refused to back any candidate other than a Socialist. As a portent of future difficulties, Communist observers to the plenum were coolly received and Communist parties in general were actually denounced by hardliners on the Central Committee as "traitors to the Revolution in Europe and Latin America." A small far left terrorist group, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), and the Socialists' linkage to it are another sore source of contention. The Communists have always feared the capability of such radical left groups to make inroads into Communist support among youth, as well as their potential for triggering a general crackdown on the left or a military coup. After a raid by the security forces uncovered a MIR arms cache, the Communists were quick to denounce the group.

16. Despite protests of political purity from the Socialists some sort of coalition could be effected in the year before the election. The split in the Radical Party between the leftist leadership and the rightist faction which bolted to support Alessandri has made it weaker, more ideologically homogeneous, and therefore more acceptable in a future pact. The emergence of the Action Movement for Popular Unity has also been beneficial as it offers a number of attractive figures as possible compromise leaders of a united left. Lastly the Communists hope to benefit from Fidel Castro's recent temporizing on the adherence to the Soviet line. For years his harsh criticisms of the soft-line Chilean Communist Party has sharpened its differences with the Socialists. A more neutral Fidel Castro, it is hoped, would help smooth over inter-party relations as well as isolate the far leftist MIR, preventing it from making inroads into Communist youth.

17. The major and possibly insurmountable problem for a broadened FRAP will be finding a candidate acceptable to all factions and parties. The past electoral standard bearer of the left, Salvador Allende, has indicated his willingness to lead once again and has professed the necessity of forming an all inclusive "Fatherland Front." Yet there is some doubt that he could gain the nomination of his own Socialist party. Despite his close personal ties to Fidel Castro, he has been under steady fire from the more militant revolutionary leadership of the Socialist Party. Although he maintains considerable prestige and popularity among the rank and file, he has been outmaneuvered at party conferences by this leadership which maintains strong control over the party machinery. Even if he is successful in gaining the nomination, Allende has stipulated Socialist acceptance of the "Fatherland Front" as a pre-condition to his running in 1970. The rejection of either his candidacy or his platform could lead to two rival leftist slates on the ballot, a militant Socialist and a catchall leftist conglomerate dominated by the Communists.

18. Factional bickering is only one of the factors with which the left has to contend. In a reversal of its apolitical stance of the past 30 years, the Chilean military has shown signs of increasing uneasiness over the spectre of a Communist dominated government. Military leaders have raised the possibility that they would stage a coup at some time before the election if they saw such a leftist victory in the offing. Apparently, there are, as yet, no definite plans for such a takeover and no recognizable faction of perennial plotters of the sort that weave around other Latin American military establishments in pre-golpe situations. Before any pre-emptive coup the military would probably attempt to garner widespread civilian support; high military officials are even hopeful that Frei would act as a front for any government they might set up. How the increasingly current rumors of these developments will affect the prospects for a leftist front is at present not clear.

Implications for 1970 and Beyond

19. Much of course could happen in the next year to undermine Alessandri's present lead, including a setback to his health. A strong left coalition, should one emerge, would present a formidable challenge. For the present it is significant that Alessandri's political ascent seems to have thrown the traditional parties into disarray. Even before the March election, a sense of defeatism crept into the ranks of the Christian Democrats. In January a bill proposed by the Frei government which would have given future presidents the power, once in a presidential term, to dissolve Congress and call for a new election was defeated by the abstention of thirty Christian Democrats who feared that Alessandri not Tomic would be the first to implement it.

20. To some extent, the outcome of the election will be influenced by the country's economic performance. Part of the PDC's malaise and the improving fortunes of rival political forces can be attributed to the worsening economic problems of the last two years. The costs of social reforms and the growing political turmoil have had a detrimental short-term effect on the economy. These economic problems in turn prohibit a continuation of the rapid social gains of the early Frei years and place severe constraints on the government's ability to fulfill the popular expectations stimulated by his own "revolutionary" program. Already beset by both economic stagnation and rapid inflation, the administration has found its range of policy options further limited by the effects of a prolonged drought. As the election approaches, the government will be even more tempted to follow expansionary fiscal and monetary policies than in the past, but the resulting increase in the pace of inflation could have serious political consequences. In sum, the administration will be forced to choose among unpalatable alternatives—none is likely to greatly boost its political fortunes.

21. The diffusion that marks the present pre-election scene is in vivid contrast to the polarization between the Marxist left and the center left and right that characterized the period before the 1964 election. Then the fear of a Marxist president combined with the fresh appeal of the PDC gave Frei his comfortable majority. Now uneasiness over the PDC's performance and the inability of the established parties to provide an alternative merely enhances the appeal of Alessandri as a sort of political patrón, an estate manager who remains aloof from party politics.

22. Yet Alessandri's growing popularity probably does not mean that Chile is swinging in any very definite or permanent way from a leftward to a rightward trend. Alessandri's appeal is probably more personal than ideological in that he evokes a traditional "strongman" image. His polling strength has been estimated to be about 30 to 40 percent at the electorate. This in itself poses nagging questions as to his tenure and the future of the constitutional system as well should he win a plurality. As elections in which no candidate receives a majority are thrown into Congress, would the present Congress, which is dominated by forces of the center left and left, confirm the wishes of the rightist minority that gave Alessandri his plurality—especially if it were a spare one? If Congress voted against Alessandri, would the military stage a coup on his behalf?

23. It is a fair assumption that even a hostile Congress (especially one threatened by a military coup) would not attempt to nullify an Alessandri victory, if one came to pass, and jeopardize the constitutional system. Assuming an orderly succession, Alessandri still would face a troubled tenure. Economic problems would be intensified by pre-election spending and he would be likely to come into office with no clear mandate for any specific policy other than "cleaning up the mess in Santiago." He would inherit the present Congress (at least until elections in 1973) in which he has little support and incurs much animosity for his contempt of politicians. Because of this latter trait Alessandri has furthermore aroused suspicions that he intends somehow to rule without Congress and with the military.

24. Although he apparently has no intention of overturning the social programs of the Frei government, Alessandri, if he gains office, would probably be under pressure to do so by his conservative backers. At the same time Alessandri as president could not help but be caught up in the demands for continued evolutionary or revolutionary change. Such demands are evoked by parties or groups that may be presently divided and at odds but nonetheless continue to represent a large proportion of the Chilean electorate. How all of this would affect his style of government is difficult to say at present, but he and other Chileans would probably soon find out that the estate had changed considerably since Don Jorge turned over the keys five years ago.