

Low-intensity democracy



Despite its economic stability and the substantial improvements that the Government has achieved in the rates of poverty and education, 52% of Chileans “feel they are losing out, and 74% have negative feelings about the country’s economic system”. This is no paradox, since according to the World Bank, Chile is among the 15 countries with the worst income distribution in the world. Things are not much better in politics, where the principle of “one person, one vote” is not viable in the “protected democracy” inherited from the military dictatorship.

Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (CEM)
Solidaridad y Organización Local (SOL)
Programa de Ciudadanía y Gestión Local
Fundación de Superación de la Pobreza
ACTIVA

Ana María Arteaga / Carlos Ochsenius

Chile stands out in the region as an example of economic, political and social stability. In little more than a decade of democratic government, the percentage of the population living in poverty fell from 39% in 1990 to 20.6% in 2003. In education it managed to increase pre-school education from 21% to 32%, secondary education from 80% to 90%, and higher education from 15% to 31% in 2000.¹ According to the 2002 Census, 96.1% of households have electricity and 91.9% have running water, both provided by public utility companies; 51.5% of households have a fixed line telephone and 51% have at least one mobile phone.

How can it be, then, that in spite of what these figures show, “52% of Chileans feel they are losing out, and 74% have negative feelings about the country’s economic system (insecurity, anger, a sense of loss)”?²

The Human Development Report 1998 in Chile had already made a diagnosis to the effect that “in the wake of the population’s extensive difficulties, there are serious problems with human security”. Four years after this study was published, there are fundamental reasons why, in spite of the bonanza, the majority of Chileans still feel insecure.

The people’s problems

According to the World Bank, Chile is among the 15 countries with the worst income distribution in the world, and, what is even more serious, as time passes this situation has tended to become more pronounced.³

TABLE 1

Distribution of autonomous income 1990-2000 (energy, gas and water)					
SHARE IN TOTAL INCOME	1990	2000	SHARE IN TOTAL INCOME	1990	2000
Quintile I	4.1	3.7	Quintile V	57.4	57.5
Quintile II	8.1	8.2	Ratio 20/20	14	15.3
Quintiles III and IV	30.4	30.6			

Source: MIDEPLAN, Distributive Impact of Social Expenditure, 2000.

The present Government is aware of the high political cost which any redistributive formula would involve, and it has preferred to pursue a policy aimed at improving the population’s opportunities, mainly through education. Consequently, it has, among other measures, considerably increased the ministerial budget in this area and submitted to Congress a bill which would raise the period of obligatory basic schooling from 8 to 12 years. This initiative (undoubtedly a step forward) faces two obstacles however that, at least in the short term, will be difficult to overcome.

The first is the enormous gap between the quality of municipal education, which handles around 70% of schoolchildren in the country, and in which there is an investment of approximately USD 50 per pupil per month, and that of private education, which spends three times more per month on each child. Naturally, this makes for inequalities in both groups.⁴

The second obstacle is that the kind of education that is being imparted to the population does not seem to guarantee access to the job market, nor has it become an efficient tool for overcoming the most severe poverty, as had been expected. This was shown in a recent study of the characteristics of extreme poverty in the country, which found that a high proportion (49%) of the people who lack the resources to meet their most basic needs had completed basic education (8 years of schooling), but that the average increase in schooling for this sector is not being translated into social mobility or improved living conditions.⁵

The young: no citizenship, no consumption, no work

Another sign of the discontent which is afflicting Chileans is expressed in the reduction in the number of people registered on the electoral roll. This fell from 89.5% in 1991 to 69.1% in 2003, which amounts to a reduction of 20.4 percentage points.⁶

What is more, in the last presidential elections (2001) 21.5% of people over 18 (voting age) were not registered. When we add spoilt or blank votes (12.65%) and abstentions (13.36%) to this total, it is evident that there is serious under-representation.

A particularly startling fact is that a more detailed analysis of the figures reveals that 83% of young Chileans between the ages of 18 and 25 are not on the electoral register. Surveys among young people show that they do not believe in elections as a mechanism to influence or bring about change in a society which discriminates against them because of their lifestyles, and their ways of thinking, dressing and behaving.

Young people “are distancing themselves from politics, and they see democracy as an elitist regime for which they do not qualify”, in other words, “a system which makes them citizens without citizenship, consumers who do not consume, and workers who are out of work.”⁷

Democracy in deficit

Among the key factors behind the high levels of dissatisfaction and distrust is the fact that the country is still ruled in accordance with a Constitution (1980)

1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report 2002, We the Chileans: A cultural challenge*. 2002, www.pnud.cl/noticias.htm

2 *Ibid.*

3 World Bank. *World Development Indicators 2000*. Table 2.8.

4 Arteaga, Ana María. “Chile. The brutal rationale of privatisation” in *Social Watch Report 2003, The Poor and the Market*. 2003, pp. 108-109.

5 “La nueva realidad de la pobreza en Chile”. Instituto Libertad y Desarrollo, Santiago, December 2003.

6 “Índice de Participación Ciudadana”. Corporación Participa, December 2003.

7 Fortunatti, Rodolfo. “Los marginados de la política” in www.portaldepluralismo.cl/interno.asp?id=1915

that was made to measure by the military regime that ran the country from 1973 to 1991. In this system the basic balance of power is not maintained by the relations between the three powers of the State, but by their relations with other constitutional bodies that are guided by political forces and not by normative powers.⁸

In this model of “protected democracy” - a masterpiece of political engineering - electoral minorities are legally over-represented in parliament because of the “binominal” system in the two houses, and because of the political weight of senators who have been appointed for life. Not only does this violate the democratic will of the people, it also constitutes an almost insurmountable obstacle to any attempt at constitutional reform. Factors like these, the fact that it is impossible for the Presidency to nominate or remove the commanders-in-chief of the different branches of the armed forces, and the fact that the National Security Council, which is mainly made up of high-ranking military leaders, maintains a “supervisory” function, raise serious doubts about the quality of democracy for the citizens of Chile.

The military regime came to an end almost 14 years ago, but in the interim there has been no progress in modifying the “protected democracy” model which has been in force in the country since 1980. “Chile is still a low-intensity democracy in that the principle of ‘one person, one vote’ is notably absent. The armed forces are far from being subordinate to civilian power, and they enjoy a degree of institutional and budgetary autonomy that is unique in the Americas at the present time.”⁹

Community problems, private fears

Along with the freezing of political institutions inherited from the military regime, and the staggering inequalities in Chilean society, there is a third key factor behind the high levels of dissatisfaction and human insecurity.¹⁰ This factor is what has come to be recognised as the “privatisation of community life”, or in other words, the capacity of the model to convert shared and collective problems into individual and private ones.¹¹

This situation is highlighted in the Human Development Report 2000, where “in daily conversation people do not normally talk about the dreams that they all share. They talk about their expectations for individual and family well-being, but they do not seem to have an image of a collective life that they can aspire to.”¹²

This individualisation of Chilean society - the loss of direction, the absence of collective projects (a dominant theme in previous democratic periods) - also becomes apparent in the personalisation of fears about the future, the fact that there are no allusions to society’s shortcomings or to contradictions which affect society as a whole. Thus, instead of talking about inequality in society or inequality of opportunity, redundancies, threats to public safety, or people’s lack of protection when faced with a specific event or after retirement people give responses that refer to personal apprehensions: “not being able to raise my children”, “being the victim of a robbery”, “my insurance not covering me against illness”, “losing my job”, “retiring with a small pension”, or “not having any pension at all”. In all these complaints, we can detect a profound lack of confidence in the institutions in charge of protecting the public.¹³

The crucial point here is that not only is the Chilean economy extremely open to foreign trade and lacking in regulatory mechanisms, a situation which will become accentuated when the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States comes into force on 1 January 2004, but also that most of the country’s social, cultural and political institutions are increasingly subordinated to dominant market forces. This is what is happening in higher education, the mass media, the health and education systems, and in the institutions that create and disseminate culture. This makes it more difficult for the citizenry to exercise their rights or to make their voices heard through the usual channels.

The devices of public misinformation

The lack of interest that Chilean society shows in public matters is also evident from the fact that there was scant reaction to or public debate about the signing of the FTA between Chile and the United States. This puts an end to the long campaign run by the Government in collaboration with the business sector, to convince the Chilean public of the advantages of the treaty.

By minimising the concessions made to the United States (and not making any reference to the fact that the lowering of tariff barriers would result in increased profit margins for importers rather than in lower prices for Chilean consumers) the Government somehow managed to convey a message to public opinion that emphasised two main ideas: that the Chilean economy was mature, and that from now on the country and all Chileans would enjoy the prestige of “playing in the big league”.¹⁴

The indifference with which the Chilean people received the signing of the FTA is surprising when we consider the negative effects that a treaty like this had in Canada and Mexico, whose economies are considerably larger than Chile’s. This reaction can be explained partly by the fact that the average citizen is uninformed. Although 87% of households have television and the proportion connected to the Internet is rising swiftly,¹⁵ ownership of the mass media is concentrated in the hands of two large consortiums, El Mercurio and the Consorcio Periodístico de Chile SA. They not only subscribe to neo-liberalism in economic matters, but to a profoundly conservative vision of society when it comes to values and cultural matters.¹⁶

The Catholic Church has systematically opposed the ratification of the facultative protocol of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and refused to discuss therapeutic abortion and the very existence of a divorce law. It exhorts believers in parliament to follow their postulates when taking decisions on cultural matters or questions involving values.¹⁷ Together with the Church, the ideological monopoly of the mass media does not only have an effect on the quality and kind of information that is given to the public, but it also hinders free and in-depth debate about important matters that affect Chilean society as a whole, and, what is more, about the course we wish to take as a country. ■

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9 Heine, Jorge. “Modernización y malestar: la segunda fase de la transición chilena” in *Perspectivas*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Santiago de Chile, May 2001.

10 Heine, Jorge. “¿Modernización o congelación política?” *La Época*, 4 September 1991.

11 Salazar V, Gabriel. “Proyecto y exclusión: Dialéctica histórica de la desconfianza en Chile”. *La Época*, 4 September 1991.

12 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report Chile 2000. Synopsis*. 2000.

13 “Percepción ante los riesgos: inseguridades de los chilenos”. *Opinión Pública* No. 4, Fundación Chile 21, Santiago de Chile, November 2001.

14 Cademártori, José. “TLC: Chile cayó en la trampa de EE.UU.”. 6 April 2003. www.portaldenegocios.cl/article2249.html

15 Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas. *Censo 2002. Síntesis de Resultados*. Santiago de Chile, March 2003.

16 Sunkel, Guillermo and Esteban Geoffroy. “Concentración económica de los medios de comunicación”. *Nuevo Periodismo* Collection, Editorial LOM, Santiago de Chile, 2001.

17 La Morada Corporation (Coordination). *Informe Sombra CEDAW 2003*. Santiago de Chile, July 2003.