

THE CHILEAN UPRISING: ONE YEAR ON

An explainer

Background

In 1970, Salvador Allende became the first democratically-elected socialist president in Chile. During his mandate, [he promoted economic justice and social reforms](#). Three years later, Allende's government was overthrown in a [CIA-backed coup](#) led by General Augusto Pinochet. This marked the beginning of a dictatorship known for severe human rights violations and aggressive neoliberal economic policies.

The military dictatorship ended in 1990 following a countrywide referendum that rejected the extension of Pinochet's rule. Despite the transition to democracy, Chile continued to pursue economic neoliberalism, which widened the gap between rich and poor and concentrated power in a tiny minority of the country's elite.

Social discontent culminated in a general uprising that flared up in 2019 not only due to a 30-peso rise in public transport fares, but also with people demanding deep changes to the socio-economic structures of the country, social justice, and a more egalitarian society.

It is not about 30 pesos, it is about 30 years

Although Chile has been described as “the jaguar of Latin America” because its economy has grown faster than average for the last three decades, the continuing experimentation with free-market policies by [successive governments](#) led to rampant inequality and a deep social divide.



What our MEPs say



María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop
(Podemos, Spain)

"The referendum represents a historic opportunity for Chile to overcome the constitutional framework of the dictatorship to ensure equality and to put an end to the neoliberal model that subordinated public interest to big corporations in the name of private property. It is a model that generated enormous inequality and severe human rights violations."



Miguel Urbán Crespo
(Anticapitalistas, Spain)

"President Piñera declared war against his own people: he placed the military on the streets as if they were going to confront an enemy. But who was this enemy? It was the people tired of living in a social pandemic of inequality generated by 30 years of neoliberal policies."

Indeed, as the Chilean Constitution guarantees that [market mechanisms](#) are the main source of social provisions, like education, healthcare and pensions, citizens have had to carry these burdens mostly by themselves. While [the richest 20%](#) of the population earns approximately ten times more than the [poorest 20%](#), Chile can be better described as an "economic illusion" rather than a miracle.

The constitutional moment

The social mobilisations of October 2019 soon turned into a national movement advocating for a new social pact that guarantees human dignity for all. Citizens proposed a new Constitution written through popular participation. Following intense days of protests, on 15 November 2019, President Piñera announced that a referendum would take place the following April for people to decide whether they wanted a new Constitution and under which mechanism it should be written - either via a Constituent Assembly or a Joint Convention.

The announcement came after political parties signed an agreement with the government under the threat of a possible [coup d'état](#). With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government postponed the referendum to October 2020 while encouraging citizens to continue their business as usual, in complete disregard of public health.

Eye mutilations & human rights violations

President Piñera responded to the demands of the people with repression. Local and international human rights organisations denounced torture, arbitrary detentions, sexual abuse, excessive use of force, the erosion of press freedom and extrajudicial executions. Moreover, police [targeted the eyes](#) of protesters, with 460 cases and injuries recorded by March 2020, making this a distinct hallmark of police violence in Chile during the uprising.

The Piñera-government turned a blind eye to [international calls](#) to put an end to police abuses, escalating the repression. On 17 May 2020, the president proposed legislation to protect himself from international criminal charges by giving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the power to decide the circumstances in which the International Criminal Court could intervene in Chile. This move came as [the Hague launched an investigation](#) into possible crimes against humanity by the president, former Interior Minister Gonzalo Blumel, his predecessor Andres Chadwich and the General Director of the police force Mario Rozas.

The view of the Left

In a country where the wealthy elite has preserved its status with violence and corruption, while the poor are marginalised and excluded from social participation, citizens' anger is justified and their right to protest should be protected. Police violence should end and those responsible should be brought to justice. Ultimately, Chile's government must heed the demands of the majority of people in the country for a new social contract that puts people first, instead of the economic elites, abolishing the neoliberal orthodoxies that have prevailed in the country for over three decades.