

The dam breaks

Pent-up frustration at the flaws of a successful democracy.

After two decades of strong economic growth, social progress and enviable political stability, Chile has suddenly started behaving in a manner more akin to some of its neighbours. The past two months have seen huge protest marches by students, in which a small, violent minority have clashed with riot police. Housewives have banged saucepans in solidarity with the students. And this week the main trade-union confederation tried to bring the country to a halt in a two-day general strike—the most ambitious stoppage since the 1980s.

The students want education, which in Chile relies heavily on private funding, to be turned into a non-profit, state-dominated, system. The unions want the mostly private pension system to be supplemented with more state provision. They also want changes in labour laws and an increase in business taxes to pay for more social spending. And they are demanding a new constitution. Like many of the things the protesters want changed, the constitution dates from the 1980s and the dictatorship of General Pinochet (although many of its clauses have since been amended).

This upsurge of popular unrest comes 18 months after a centre-right president, Sebastián Piñera, took office. Before him, the centre-left Concertación had ruled for a relatively tranquil 20 years, overseeing a long and delicate transformation to democracy. "The Concertación kept all these energies bottled up, but this government, without wanting to, has allowed them to escape," says Eugenio Tironi, a sociologist and author of a new book on Mr Piñera entitled "Why don't they love me?". While the Concertación knew how to talk to the masses, Mr Piñera's team "with their Macbooks and Starbucks coffee" have little rapport with ordinary people, says Mr Tironi.

Mr Piñera has thus become the butt of the pent-up frustrations of the past two decades, in some ways unfairly. The government has floundered. But the Concertación is no more popular. And in backing an irresponsible student demand for a referendum on educational policy, a subject irreducible to a single question, it has shown intellectual cowardice. All politicians have been disconcerted by discontent that is at once deep-rooted and nebulous.

Chileans seem to have forgotten temporarily that their gradualist democracy has real achievements of which they can be proud. The young are richer, healthier, better-educated and freer than their parents. On the other hand, some of the grievances are legitimate. Chile remains highly stratified despite wider access to education. Students graduate with crippling debts. The electoral system has created a built-in political duopoly. Many younger Chileans don't bother to register to vote.

The tide of protest may now be starting to turn. The government has come up with some reasonable proposals for education and some students have begun talks. The strike began on August 24th with a few barricades by protesters and only patchy support. Public transport, the mining industry and banks were operating more or less normally. This suggests that the unions may have overreached.

But many Chileans are no longer prepared to ignore what they see as flaws in their hard-won democracy in exchange for political stability and economic growth. Unless the politicians enact some sensible reforms quickly—of education, the electoral system and taxes—it is not clear what might happen next.

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