

CHILE - Clashes Break Out After Pinochet's Death (by Eduardo Gallardo, TruthOut)

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[Truthout](#) - Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who terrorized his opponents for 17 years after taking power in a bloody coup, died Sunday, putting an end to a decade of intensifying efforts to bring him to trial for human rights abuses blamed on his regime. He was 91.

Supporters saw Pinochet as a Cold War hero for overthrowing democratically elected President Salvador Allende at a time when the U.S. was working to destabilize his Marxist government and keep Chile from exporting communism in Latin America.

But the world soon reacted in horror as Santiago's main soccer stadium filled with political prisoners to be tortured, shot, disappeared or forced into exile.

Pinochet's dictatorship laid the groundwork for South America's most stable economy, but his crackdown on dissent left a lasting legacy: His name has become a byword for the state terror, in many cases secretly supported by the United States, that retarded democratic change across the hemisphere.

Pinochet died with his family at his side at the Santiago Military Hospital on Sunday, a week after suffering a heart attack.

"This criminal has departed without ever being sentenced for all the acts he was responsible for during his dictatorship," lamented Hugo Gutierrez, a human rights lawyer involved in several lawsuits against Pinochet.

Hundreds of Pinochet supporters gathered outside the hospital, weeping and trading insults with people in passing cars. Some shouted "Long Live Pinochet!" and sang Chile's national anthem.

Violent clashes broke out between police and Pinochet opponents who threw rocks at cars and set up fire barricades on the city's main avenue. Police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd. Authorities said there were a number of arrests, but no immediate reports of injuries.

Many Chileans saw Pinochet's death as reason for celebration. Hundreds of cheering, flag-waving people crowded a major plaza in the capital, drinking champagne and tossing confetti.

"Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile represented one of most difficult periods in that nation's history," said Tony Fratto, a White House spokesman. "Our thoughts today are with the victims of his reign and their families."

Chile's government says at least 3,197 people were killed for political reasons during Pinochet's rule, but courts allowed the aging general to escape hundreds of criminal complaints as his health declined.

The mustachioed Pinochet left no doubt about who was in charge after the Sept. 11, 1973 coup, when warplanes bombed the presidential palace and Allende committed suicide with a submachine gun Fidel Castro had given him.

"Not a leaf moves in this country if I'm not moving it," Pinochet said.

But he refused for years to take responsibility his regime's abuses, blaming subordinates for killings or tortures.

Only on his 91st birthday last month did he take "full political responsibility for everything that happened" during his long rule. But the statement made no reference to the rights abuses, and said he had to act to prevent Chile's economic and political disintegration.

Born Nov. 25, 1915, the son of a customs official in the port of Valparaiso, Pinochet was appointed army commander just 19 days before the coup by Allende, who mistakenly thought Pinochet would defend constitutional rule.

The CIA had worked for months to destabilize the Allende government, including financing a truckers strike that paralyzed the delivery of goods across Chile, but Washington denied having anything to do with the coup itself.

Soon after Pinochet's seizure of power, soldiers carried out mass arrests of leftists. Tanks rumbled through the streets of the capital, and many detainees were herded into the National Stadium, which became a torture and detention center. Other leftists were rounded up by death squads, and the "Caravan of Death" to Chile's forbidding Atacama desert left victims buried in unmarked mass graves.

Pinochet disbanded Congress, banned political activity and crushed dissent. In addition to the dead, more than 1,000 victims remain unaccounted for. Thousands more were arrested, tortured and forced into exile.

Pinochet defended his authoritarian rule as a crusade to build a society free of communism. He even claimed partial credit for the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

"I see myself as a good angel," he told a Miami Spanish-language television station in 2004.

He showed no mercy to his perceived enemies. When investigators uncovered coffins that had been stuffed with two bodies each in the aftermath of the coup, he dismissed it as a "a good cemetery space-saving measure."

Pinochet seized power at a time when Chile's economy was in near ruins, partly due to the CIA's covert destabilization efforts and partly to Allende's mismanagement.

He launched a radical free-market program that at first triggered a financial collapse and unprecedented joblessness. But it laid the basis for South America's healthiest economy, which has grown by 5 percent to 7 percent a year since 1984.

Pinochet lost an October 1988 referendum to extend his rule and was forced to call an election. He lost to Patricio Aylwin, whose center-left coalition has ruled Chile since 1990.

Pinochet avoided prosecution for years after his presidency. He remained army commander for eight more years and then was a senator-for-life, a position guaranteed under the constitution his regime wrote.

It took a Spanish judge to remove Pinochet's cloak of invincibility, and inspire Chileans to make their own efforts to hold him to account. He was in London for back surgery in 1998 when the judge asked Britain to extradite him to Spain for human rights violations. British authorities ruled he was too ill to be tried, and sent him back to Chile, where ghosts of the past were coming forward.

More than 200 criminal complaints were filed against him and he was under house arrest at the time of his death, but courts repeatedly ruled he could not face trial because of poor physical and mental health.

Even longstanding Pinochet allies abandoned him in 2004, when a U.S. Senate investigative committee found Pinochet kept multimillion-dollar secret accounts at the Riggs Bank in Washington. Investigators said he had up to \$17 million in foreign accounts, and owed \$9.8 million in back taxes. He, his wife and several of his children were indicted on tax evasion charges.

During his final years, Pinochet lived in seclusion at heavily guarded Santiago mansion and his countryside residence.

The government said Sunday that Pinochet will not receive the state funeral normally granted to a former president, but only military honors at the Santiago military academy. President Michelle Bachelet, who was imprisoned and mistreated during the dictatorship, recently said it would be "a violation of my conscience" to attend a state funeral for Pinochet.

As he requested, Pinochet will be cremated, according to son Marco Antonio, to avoid desecration of his tomb by "people who always hated him."

The government said it had authorized the Chilean flag to be flown at half-staff at military barracks nationwide.

Pinochet is survived by his wife, Lucia, two sons and three daughters.

http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/121106P.shtml