



Responding to the anti-Allende coup in Chile, 1973

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Introduction: a nation torn

How far does the Organization of American States (OAS) get involved in the domestic affairs of its Member States? As a regional international organization, the OAS is what the members say it is. But it was designed to resolve *international disputes* between the states, to prevent border quarrels, from escalating into armed violence. It is not well equipped or strongly mandated to influence their *domestic affairs*.

If the OAS doesn't act on its Member States' most serious domestic problems, does the OAS risk becoming irrelevant? Will it be captured by its most powerful members (the United States especially, but also the conservative military governments of Brazil and Chile) or by its most dogmatic revolutionaries (led by Cuba)?

It was fifty years this autumn. The military coup on 11 September 1973, toppled the constitutionally elected government of Chilean President Salvador Allende.¹ The military take-over posed exactly these kinds of dilemmas for the OAS. Chileans were hopelessly divided, on the verge of a dangerous domestic earthquake. For the nation, then with a population of 9.8 million, the biggest question was not whether violence could be averted, but which side would start it, how severe it would be, what the consequences would be, and who could most legitimately rule after?



The conclusion of 1972 saw the government of Salvador Allende and his United Front party struggling to maintain relations with their ruling coalition parties as the economy began to deteriorate. Elected by a constitutional quirk, the minority government of Salvador Allende struggled for legitimacy and authority. Opposition, the majority of the country, was fierce. It was a recipe for dangerous instability. The United States, under President Nixon, covertly supported Chilean conservative parties.

¹ 'Chile is still haunted by the coup in September 1973', *The Economist*, 31 August 2023,; *The Economist*, 2 September 2023,

<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/08/31/chile-is-still-haunted-by-the-coup-in-september-1973>

Cuba was open in its support of President Allende, while the Soviet Union was supportive but more careful.²

In the elections of 1973, a coalition of the moderate Christian Democratic Party (CDP) and the National Party the 'Confederation for Democracy' challenged Allende's *United Front* for control. Would Allende be able to continue his radically progressive agenda? When Allende's coalition earned 43.4 percent of the vote, a 6 percent increase from 1970, the United Front stayed in control. The hopes of the opposition were crushed.³



Chilean soldiers arresting supporters of Salvador Allende on 11 September 1973

Fearful of a coming social revolution that would strip the middle and upper classes of their wealth and property, forcing millions into exile and endangering the lives of thousands, the right agreed their only option was to remove Allende and his government was through a military coup. The situation was almost repeated in 2015 in Venezuela, except then the Socialist government

of Nicolás Maduro acted first, arresting thousand and sending millions of Venezuelans into exile in Columbia and other countries.

Pressed between domestic counter-revolutionaries, the Chilean military and the CIA, Allende was cut off from much of the rest of the world and surrounded by a military insurgency.⁴ Although attempting to call for another election on his presidency, Allende's wishes would be ignored as the military under led by General Pinochet would take over forming a military junta government that would hold power for the following 15 years.⁵

The events of 1973 went down in history as a turning point in Latin American history. Cuban influence was declining against US assertiveness. Human rights and democratization were increasingly recognized as important goals, but still not widely observed or promoted.

The fuse is lit: Eduardo Frei Administration

By the 1960s, Chile was largely poor and working class, increasingly divided politically, with deep divisions between traditional interests and increasingly revolutionary groups. The immediate chain of events began in 1964, when the conservative, Christian Democratic Party leader Eduardo Frei won the presidency with 54 percent of the vote, against Allende's 39 percent.

²"Covert action in Chile." *Equipo Nizkor - Accion Encubierta en Chile*, 18 December 1975. <https://www.derechos.org/nizkor/chile/doc/encubierta.html>

³"Unexpected Election Result." *Chilean Memory*, n.d., <https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-93515.html>

⁴Friedman, Uri. "The Other 9/11: A CIA Agent Remembers Chile's Coup." *The Atlantic*, 11

September 2014.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/chile-coup-salvador-allende-cia/380082/>

⁵"Allende Dijo: 'Si Pierdo El Plebiscito, Me Voy.'" *Cooperativa.cl*, 2 September 2013.

<https://www.cooperativa.cl/noticias/pais/dd-hh/allende-dijo-si-pierdo-el-plebiscito-me-voy/2013-09-02/091008.html>

Frei was promoted as the ‘first progressive President’ in Chile’s history.⁶



Eduardo Frei speaking to a crowd

With a majority of in both Chambers of Congress belonging to his Christian Democratic Party, Frei enacted his “Revolution in Liberty Program”, striking a balance between socialism and laissez faire capitalism. It was a delicate balancing act in the midst of increasing national polarization.

Among the most successful efforts of his administration was the 1965 *Agrarian Reform* that broke up large farming estates, allowed unionization of workers, and fostered a strong agro-business mode, widely supported across ideological lines.⁷ Second was the “Chileanization” of the copper industry. Previously controlled by foreign (especially US) firms, copper was Chile’s largest export earner. The reforms permitted gradual nationalization, as the Chilean state gained control of 51 percent of copper mining firms, to re-localize foreign owned businesses which continue to provide

profit for the government. Copper nationalization, though, gave the country’s leaders something new to fight over, as different groups sought to benefit from the new wealth.⁸

Coupled with international non-alignment, Frei sought a more centrist approach for Chile. But his reforms could not placate the lower and middle classes, radicalizing in opposite directions. His reforms ultimately increased turmoil. The left attacked Frei for not going far enough. The right attacked him for transitioning Chile into a socialist nation.

1970 Presidential Election

The Presidential election of 1970 was among the most controversial in Chilean history. With a constitutional limit on a sitting president serving consecutive terms, the incumbent, Eduardo Frei, was ineligible to run for reelection. The electorate was badly split. At the conclusion of the vote totals, Salvador Allende was in first place, albeit with just 36 percent of the vote. Following behind were former president Jorge Alessandri Rodriguez of the National Party with 34 percent of the vote and Radomiro Tomic of the CDP with 27 percent of the vote.⁹ Despite the clear plurality, the Chilean constitution required any presidential candidate to secure over 50% of the vote, otherwise the Congress would appoint the next president of Chile.

⁶Croquevielle, Tomás. “Eduardo Frei Montalva: Chile’s First Progressive President.” *Chile Today*, 6 February 2019. <https://chiletoday.cl/eduardo-frei-montalva-chiles-first-progressive-president/>

⁷ ‘The Agrarian Reform (1962-1973).’ Chilean Memory, n.d., <https://memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3536.html>

⁸Hurtado-Torres, Sebastián. *The Gathering Storm: Eduardo Frei’s Revolution in Liberty and Chile’s Cold War*. Cornell University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501747182.003.0009>

⁹Rivera, Diego. “The 1970 Elections Part II – the Results.” *Chile Today*, 22 August 2020. <https://chiletoday.cl/part-ii-the-1970-elections-the-results/>



In happier times: President Salvador Allende

Foreign influence played a major role in the leadup and aftermath of the presidential election. Where the USSR supported Allende with USD 50,000, the United States gave USD 700,000 to support election of Alessandri.¹⁰ Both powers vied for a more ideologically aligned power that would support either nation's interests.

With a plurality of the votes going to Allende, the United States sought to build support for the CDP while creating civil unrest for Alessandri, appointment who had promised to step-down, allowing a second election to occur. However, following an alliance between Allende and Tomic, Allende was declared President, with 153 votes in Congress to 35 for Alessandri.¹¹

1970-73, Chile under President Allende

Building off the reforms of Frei, Allende sought to democratically transition Chile into a socialist nation. Expanding upon the agrarian reforms, seizing the remaining large estates for management by the federal government, local cooperatives, and to be owned by the peasants that farmed the land, totaling over 6.4 million hectares of agricultural lands.¹²

Similar initiatives were pursued in access to books through the nationalization of the Quimantú National Publishing House that would result in lower costs and increased accessibility across the nation.¹³ Such policies were tied together under the nationalization of 80% of industry including the total securement of the copper industry.¹⁴

As a result of the political alliance between the United Front and Christian Democratic Union, much of Allende's agenda was implemented in the first year resulting in inflation reduction and economic stabilization. Yet that alliance was tense, with strains beginning with snubs towards Frei's contribution to nationalization of copper mines.¹⁵ The assassination of former Minister of the Interior Zujovic of the CDP, by left-wing

¹⁰Rivera, Diego. "The 1970 Elections Part II – the Results." *Chile Today*, 22 August 2020.

<https://chiletoday.cl/part-ii-the-1970-elections-the-results/>

¹¹Rivera, Diego. "The 1970 Elections Part II – the Results." *Chile Today*, 22 August 2020.

<https://chiletoday.cl/part-ii-the-1970-elections-the-results/>

¹²"The Agrarian Reform (1962-1973)." *Chilean Memory*, n.d.

<https://memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3536.html>

¹³"Quimantú National Publishing House (1971-1973)." *Chilean Memory*, n.d..

<https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-3362.html>

¹⁴"The Popular Unity Government (1970-1973)." *Chilean Memory*, n.d.,

<http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-31433.html>

¹⁵"The Nationalization of Copper." Alejandro Hales Jamarne, n.d.,

<https://www.bcn.cl/historiapolitica/archivohales/col-eciones/v/participacion-politica-y-membresias/la-nacionalizacion-del-cobre>

guerrillas, worsened distrust hardened this division between the two parties.¹⁶

The OAS and its role

The concept of an regional, international body of national governments for the Americas dates back to the South American revolutionary pioneer Simón Bolívar, who hosted the Panama Conference of 1826.

The idea of regional a body that would meet regularly started in 1889, when the First International Conference of American States was hosted and officiated in the United States. However, the organization wouldn't officially be created in its modern form until 1948, with the signing in Bogotá, Colombia, of *the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS)*.¹⁷



In 1948, led by USA Secretary of State George Marshall, the OAS and its member states would adopt a pledge to fight communism in the western hemisphere.¹⁸ With the ratification by all 21 Member States, as it was then, the treaty entered into force in December 1951, defining the organization's future goals and objectives.

Prior to 1970, the OAS hosted intermittent conferences where issues, agreement and treaties on commerce, security, and collaboration were discussed. Following an amendment to the original OAS Charter, the organization switched

¹⁶Castro, Matías. "Carlota Vallebona, former VOP guerrilla, breaks 48 years of silence: 'We were an instrument of Popular Unity.'" *El Desconcierto - Prensa digital libre*, 9 November 2019. <https://www.eldesconcierto.cl/tipos-moviles/2019/10/09/carlota-vallebona-ex-guerrillera-de-la-vop-rompe-48-anos-de-silencio-fuimos-un-instrumento-de-la-unidad-popular.html>

¹⁷ "Who We Are." Organization of American States, n.d.,

https://www.oas.org/en/about/who_we_are.asp

¹⁸ "Organization of American States." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, n.d.,

<https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/Organizat-ion-of-American-States>



to a General Assembly format, convening on a regular basis.¹⁹

By 1973, three new American nations signed onto the OAS charter, joining the original 21 founding members. Included were Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Cuba's membership was suspended in 1962.²⁰ *Note:* Cuba is included as an active member state for the purposes of this ODUMUNC simulation.

Country Positions

Although some nations contributed to the undermining of Chilean Constitutional Democracy supporting instigative efforts for the coup d'état, public expressions by nations across the globe stressed disapproval towards the consequences of the military takeover. Criticism was led by communist and non-aligned countries. Other countries tended not to publicly defend the military government, but accept it silently.

Behind the scenes, it would later be uncovered decades after the events had concluded that the CIA had full awareness of the intended coup yet chose to avoid acting to prevent the history that would unfold. Discussions between then President Richard Nixon would occur with other leaders in Latin America including Brazilian president Emilio Médici on intervening against socialist governments in the region.²¹

Cuba led criticism of the military take-over, despite the fact that the Cuban government itself came to power through military action. In Argentina, President Juan Domingo Perón

would condemn the actions of the military junta quoted as saying the events were a, "fatality for the continent."²²

What role for the OAS?

For a regional organization like the OAS, events in Chile were a crisis with no neutral option. Should they let Chile be, regardless of what happened, allowing a sovereign state and democratic people to do as they will, regardless of the consequences for domestic opponents and other countries in the region? Doing nothing meant responsibility for what happened next under Socialist rule or the military government that replaced it. Outright support of Allende might appeal to the principle of democracy, but most Chileans did not accept the outcome as democratic. Should OAS support Chilean conservatives and armed forces, even if that means watching as democracy perishes, and sharing responsibility for what might happen next under a military dictatorship?

Should the OAS take a side, opposing or supporting the Chilean military? Or is there a middle path the organization can follow, a way to save Chile in its seeming rush to self-destruction? Can the OAS find a path which will not favor revolutionary or conservative governments elsewhere in the region?

Much is at stake here, for Chile, for its people, for the ambitions of other Member States, and for the OAS itself. The immediate issue is the fate of Chile, and implications for the nation's people. The larger, long-term issue is whether

¹⁹ "Our History." Organization of American States, n.d.,

https://www.oas.org/en/about/our_history.asp

²⁰ "Member States." Organization of American States, n.d.,

https://www.oas.org/en/member_states/default.asp

²¹ "Brazil Conspired with U.S. to Overthrow Allende." *The National Security Archive*, 16 August 2009.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180708142510/http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB282/index.htm>

²² Ortega, José Emilio. "Perón y Chile." *Encrucijada Americana*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1 December 2014), pp. 67–83. <https://doi.org/10.53689/ea.v6i2.67>



revolutionary or conservative governments will dominate the region, and whether or not the OAS should play a role shaping the future of its Member States' domestic policies.

Some possible proposals for action

There is virtually no limit of the range of action available to the member states of the OAS. They can stick to old precedents or create completely new principles on which to act, so long as their responses are consistent with international law and the OAS Charter. Below are some important possibilities for action.

Do nothing. Many OAS member states regard domestic matters as the exclusive responsibility of each country. So long as they do not threaten the security of other OAS countries, they believe each member is completely sovereign within its territory. This doctrine of *domestic non-interference* is widely, but not universal respected. In practice, countries do get involved in each other's domestic situation, often giving political support to like-minded political parties who can help them when in power, but such intervention tends to be discrete.

Create a commission. Rather than act, it might suit the member states of the OAS more to create a commission to study the situation and recommend further action, possibly including innovative action. Such a study commission would be highly political. The OAS would have to decide its mandate of responsibilities, how it is staffed—with officials sent by each government or independent experts chosen for their neutrality perhaps—and a schedule for its report. The OAS also would have to decide how the

report is to be received; whether it is to be acted upon or just taken into consideration.

Condemn the military government. The OAS will face great pressure from leftist and revolutionary governments, including member states like Cuba, but also sympathetic countries that recently gained independence. They will tend to aggressively support the leftist cause throughout the hemisphere, and use every available tool to attack and delegitimize their enemies on the right, wherever they are.

Suspend Chile from the OAS. Just as Cuba's membership in the OAS was suspended in 1962 after its communist revolution, Chile could be suspended as a reaction to the military coup and its consequences. The Cuban suspension was justified by the threat it posed to other member states and Cuba's assistance to revolutionary movements in other OAS countries. Most member states at the time saw revolutionary activism as a violation of the OAS Charter.

Chile is different. Its human rights violations may be appalling, but they do not threaten the peace and stability of its neighbors.²³ Later, in 1991, the OAS will modify its Charter to encourage democratic principles, but that was not the case during the years of this simulation at ODUMUNC. A different justification is required, based on violating other regional principles, such as *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* (the Bogotá Declaration).²⁴

Encourage Member States not to intervene in the war. Non-intervention is controversial. Its great appeal is neutrality. But is neutrality acceptable in the face of revolutionary threats and gross human rights violations? Non-

²³ Charter of the Organization of American States, 1948, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20119/volume-119-I-1609-English.pdf>

²⁴ American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, O.A.S. Res. XXX, adopted by the Ninth International Conference of American States (1948), Human Rights Library, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/oasinstr/zoas2dec.htm>



intervention would make it harder for activist countries to support the side they regard as more just and important to them. Opposition will come from activist governments, or those too honest to conceal covert assistance to one side or the other. But non-intervention is easy to authorize, since it is consistent with the OAS Charter.²⁵

Encourage Member States to support one side or the other. The most divisive path is actual intervention and involvement in the politics or even control of the country. Cuba and other revolutionary governments will seek to

legitimize their support for revolutionary parties and insurgencies. Conservative governments will seek to support an authority for their assistance to the Chilean military government. Such intervention might be justified under the OAS Charter, although that might require some creative interpretation, even an amendment to the Charter.²⁶

²⁵ Charter, op.cit.

²⁶ Charter, ibid.



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