



# Chile Facing the Pandemic and Social Unrest: Crisis as an Opportunity?

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## INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has shown us how dangerous regional and global pandemics are, not only in the loss of human life, but also in economic effects, destabilization, and social chaos (Malamud & Núñez, 2020; Sojo, 2020). At the same time, the pandemic has accelerated some trends in world politics, such as the decline of U.S. hegemony and the rise of China as a global power, as well as the weakness of multilateralism. The health crisis has had profound economic and monetary repercussions. The role of organizations in the Bretton Woods system, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), will be key to provide more adequate global responses than those offered in 2008, in the face of the subprime crisis (Hirst & Malacalza, 2020).

In Latin America, Covid-19 interacts with socioeconomic inequalities, corruption, overcrowding, and a lack of access to water and basic resources in informal settlements (Sojo, 2020). In Chile, it also overlaps with the social upheaval that began in October 2019.

In this essay, I analyze first the main characteristics of the social outbreak and its consequences for managing Covid-19. Next, I focus on Chile's prospects in the post-pandemic framework, emphasizing the enormous challenges derived from the lack of trust in the country's main institutions, the global economic recession, rising unemployment, and preexisting inequalities. Finally, after a large majority of Chilean citizens voted in the plebiscite of October 25, 2020, for the option to approve a new Constitution, I raise the need for true participation and transparency in the constituent process. The aim is not only to have a legitimate Fundamental Charter in its origin, but also to re-legitimize political processes.

## CHILE BEFORE COVID-19

In Chile, the Covid-19 pandemic developed in the midst of a sociopolitical crisis of epic proportions. Although the so-called social outbreak of October 2019 was triggered by the rise in the cost of the Santiago metro, it was only the tip of the iceberg that hid deep citizen discontent. The slogan that emerged from the protest linked the increase in fares to the rejection of the economic model of the last decades.

The word dignity echoed as the most obvious demand related to the retirement system, wages, the health system, and education, to the point that the most

emblematic meeting place for the protest, Plaza Baquedano, began to be called Plaza Dignidad (Dignity Square). (Freire, 2020, pp. 156–157)

Inequality is one of the keys to understanding the outbreak in Chile, and others are the lack of democratic channels for the transmission of citizen demands, and the lack of social protection for Chileans who have had to live with third-world wages yet the cost of living of a developed country (Heiss, 2020). Chile “demonstrates its discontent by questioning a model that does not transfer economic gains to the majority of the population; and by calling for social justice, higher degrees of transparency, and more meaningful levels of participation in decision making” (Oyarzún-Serrano, 2013, p. 268).

The feeling of impunity and abuse in the face of well-known cases of collusion between large companies and the illegal financing of politics also contributed to the outbreak.

Shortly before the social upheaval, attention had become focused here, on what some define as merely symbolic elements (...) Aspects such as the salary of parliamentarians (the parliamentary diet) entered the eye of the hurricane, in a country where it is more than 30 times the minimum monthly salary. (Freire, 2020, p. 158)

Several studies have put on display a crisis of representation in Chile, a perception of abuse experienced by people, and a huge gap between the elites and the citizens.

This tension is manifested, for example, in the massive student citizen protests against the educational model in 2011 and 2012, in the Aysén protests at the beginning of 2012 where demands for bettering quality of life in the southern part of the country were made, and in the resurgence of the conflict with Indigenous Mapuche populations. In all of these cases, the mobilized sectors demanded a larger participation in decision-making on issues that were directly relevant to them. (Oyarzún-Serrano, 2013, p. 269)

The government, the political class, and the main institutions—such as Congress, political parties, the executive and judicial powers, police and armed forces, and the church, among others—enjoy very low levels of legitimacy. In general, the political system has shown serious difficulty in processing the conflict. The December 2019 National Public Opinion Study No. 84, prepared by the Center for Public Studies (CEP, 2020), revealed shocking figures on the collapse of public trust. For example, President Sebastián Piñera’s approval rating stood at 6%, the lowest that has been recorded since the return to democracy. Meanwhile, support for Congress reached 3%, and that of political parties, a mere 2% (CEP, 2020).

On the one hand, during the protests a strong participation of social organizations and movements was noticed, each of which massively used symbols such as Chileans and Mapuche flags. Also, fans of the most popular soccer teams in the country joined the demonstrations, and they brought their team flags. On the other hand, there was an absence of symbols for political parties. Their presence was rejected. And when some militants attempted to represent demands of the movement, social actors strongly criticized them, calling them opportunists. Some protests were also violent. Through January 2020, it is estimated that more than 20 people died in the context of the social outbreak (OHCHR, 2019).

The National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) was able to accredit cases of homicide by state agents, abuse of force, unlawful coercion, and illegal detentions (INDH, 2019). Some human-rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, condemned the excessive use of force by the state (Heiss, 2020).

In this complex scenario, the opposition parties promoted changing the rules of the institutional game, designed during the dictatorship and fundamentally enshrined in the Political Constitution of Chile (1980), to break the status quo (Castiglioni, 2020). After several weeks of protests, on November 15, 2019, the main parties with parliamentary representation signed an agreement to allow a constitutional change in Chile, to be determined through a plebiscite. The referendum had to be postponed due to the pandemic, but was finally held on October 25, 2020. It included two questions; First, did they want a new Constitution? The answer options were: "I approve," and "I reject it." The second question addressed the mechanism for drafting the text; the options were (1) a Mixed Constitutional Convention, made up in equal parts by popularly elected members and sitting parliamentarians; or (2) a Constitutional Convention, made up exclusively of popularly elected members. Results were conclusive. An overwhelming majority (78.8%) voted in support of rewriting Chile's constitution. Another 79% also voted in favor of the new constitution being drawn up by a body that will be 100% elected by a popular vote.

The referendum was the political solution found to defuse the inconformity, anger, and mistrust of a significant percentage of Chile's population. The possibility to participate in the construction of a new Fundamental Charter gave hope to a large sector of the country that the scarce political participation could be remedied, a participation currently limited to electing representatives and having a roadmap created in democracy. Although critics argue that plebiscites are polarized binary processes, the social outburst made it clear that Chilean political actors and institutions have unusually low levels of support, and intervention is needed (Heiss, 2020).

The plebiscite and its results are just a part of the constituent process. In the coming months, voters will return to the polls, on April 11, 2021, to choose the 155 people who will draft a new constitution for Chile. In principle, the convention will have 9 months to draft the new Fundamental Charter, although this period may be extended, only once, for three months. Next, Chileans, through another referendum to be held in 2022, with compulsory voting, will decide whether to approve or reject the new Constitution.

During this period, it is key to empower the participation of the diverse interest groups in the nation. Also, it will be necessary to ensure a transparent and open space for debates. Inclusive constitution-making offers a huge opportunity for people not only to shape their own democratic destiny, but to legitimize it.

### **THE PANDEMIC IN CHILE: FROM CONFIDENCE TO ANGUISH**

In Chile, the first case of Covid-19 was made public on March 3, 2020, before the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared the pandemic on March 11. During the first few weeks, the government focused its efforts on preventing the spread of the virus by adopting testing, the isolation of suspected and diagnosed cases, the suspension of classes, and sanitary cordons. On March 19, the borders

were closed and a state of constitutional exception due to catastrophe went into effect. Subsequently, the government imposed a night curfew throughout the territory and ordered the closure of establishments, leaving open those considered as essential (supermarkets, service stations, and pharmacies).

Likewise, a system of sanitary controls and progressive quarantines was adopted in some critical points of the country. One of the main concerns was having enough mechanical respirators and hospital beds. Steps were taken to buy medical supplies, and elective surgical procedures were postponed (Castiglioni, 2020). During the few first months of pandemic management, Chile was an example to follow, implementing quarantines and conducting the largest testing in the region. Yet, it has had one of the world's highest per capita infection rates. In June, the health minister, Jaime Mañalich, was forced to resign.

Mañalich's departure came about after there was a 60% increase in cases in a single day, and a sustained increase for 10 days. It was also a response to criticism of the lack of transparency in the notification of the numbers of infected and deceased, and the implementation of dynamic rather than total quarantines. The former minister also had a difficult relationship with other social actors such as representatives of the Medical College and some mayors. "The number of deaths attributable to the virus differs among various public bodies in the same country, and in-depth studies will be expected to reach reliable and comparable figures" (Agüero, in press, author's translation). While the government followed some successful examples from countries that had previously suffered from Covid-19, it did not consider the national reality. Chile is a country with a significant part of its population living day to day and with no social protections, a sign of the disconnect between the elites and the citizens.

In the economic sphere, before the somber projections of the IMF and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) due to the effects of the pandemic, the government announced an emergency economic plan that includes three axes, (1) protection of jobs and income; (2) injection of liquidity into companies, and (3) support for family income. Some of the measures are (1) employment protection laws; Income Protection Insurance for Freelancers; early refund of income taxes; (2) tax measures for companies, especially for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), and (3) bonds; emergency family income; and supportive tax measures, respectively (Gobierno de Chile, 2020).

Still, the challenge has grown. The National Institute of Statistics of Chile (INE) reported that the country's unemployment rate rose in July to 12.2%, levels comparable only to figures from 1987. The unemployed are people who are actively looking for a job. Currently, there are slightly more than 3 million people out of work for different reasons. The economic sectors most affected in terms of employment are the hotel industry and food service (-48.5%); construction (-30.6%); and commerce (-24.0%). Meanwhile, the main setbacks by occupational category occurred in self-employed workers, -34.7%, while formal salaried workers reached -10.0% (INE, 2020).

Despite the successes and failures in the management of Covid-19, it is necessary to include other factors to have a more complete picture, for example, the aforementioned social unrest and the lack of trust in institutions. This situation is linked to Piñera's weak presidential leadership, which a large part of the citizens, the opposition, and even his own militants have constantly questioned. In this sense, the notoriety that mayors acquired is striking; "several mayors have

played a key role since the beginning of the crisis, pressuring President Piñera to close schools and implement a quarantine” (Giraudy, Niezwiecki, & Pribble, 2020, author’s translation).

Additionally, the uprooting of political parties prevents action based on the trust of an organized support that does not exist. Parties must join or respond from their position in Congress to the presidential agenda, to the agenda and demands of civil society actors—including youth, women, pensioners, indigenous people, local or regionalist groups—or to both (Agüero, in press). “The weakness of the roots of the political parties, in particular the party identity crisis, makes it difficult for Piñera and the opposition leaders to convince the electorate that their actions are for the welfare of the citizens” (Giraudy, Niezwiecki, & Pribble, 2020, author’s translation). An example occurred at the end of May, when a group of residents of the working-class municipality El Bosque, in the south of Santiago, disobeyed the quarantine, going out to protest. There was looting, and the day ended with 22 people detained (Montes, 2020). Also, popular protests called *cacerolazos*—where people bang pots, pans, and other utensils—could be seen again in July, when some neighbors took to the streets and lit bonfires in support of the constitutional reform project that was finally approved by Congress, allowing for the withdrawal of 10% of pension funds in advance, due to the pandemic.

Regarding the debates on security and Covid-19, developed countries had already defined pandemics as a threat to national security, which expanded the concept of security and its nonmilitary dimension (Sanahuja, 2020). For their part, Latin American countries have turned to the armed forces as another instrument at the disposal of the state. They have been assigned support tasks for police and border control, to guarantee confinement and limitation of movements; and responsibilities of a logistical nature such as the transport of material to guarantee supply chains and movement, among others (Verdes-Montenegro, 2020).

In Chile, the government has tried to pass laws during the pandemic that deepen the militarization of public security. Recently, the trend was reinforced with the dispatch of soldiers to the La Araucanía region, in the south of the country, where the Mapuche conflict is ongoing (Agüero, in press). Nash (2020) maintains that the government has prepared for the resumption of social protest with a battery of modifications to the role of the armed forces and police, including the custody of critical infrastructure and a law that establishes some exemptions from criminal responsibility for acts of repression by the police.

### CHALLENGES IN A POST-PANDEMIC AND CONSTITUENT CHILE

The pandemic undoubtedly postponed the mobilizations in Chile after the social outbreak, but it served to evidence further the deep inequalities in the country, overcrowding, and a lack of protection against unemployment, especially in the most vulnerable groups such as migrants, indigenous people, and women. These groups have had more difficulties accessing health care and respecting quarantines and have faced greater exposure to the virus.

During the pandemic, human mobility and migration have changed, and unfortunately exclusion has worsened. Another group strongly affected has been women; according to figures from the Chilean Ministry of Women and

Gender Equity, telephone consultations for domestic violence increased 70% during the confinement period (El Mostrador, 2020). In addition, they have been affected in their jobs, since the majority of women are informal workers, 54% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Likewise, for those who telework, it has meant assuming more domestic responsibilities and childcare, even during work hours (Bahri, 2020, p. 55).

Given institutional weaknesses and inequality, the pandemic hits the emerging middle class and the poor hardest, those who use public services most frequently. One way to face the great challenges in the region and to frame this crisis as an opportunity is to place the citizen at the core of public policies. According to Giménez and Mosqueira (2020), in Latin America, including Chile, it will be necessary to establish a new social contract and adopt a fiscal policy that helps reduce inequality through more progressive taxes, so that states invest more in public services—health, education, and social-protection systems.

In a post-pandemic Chile, the role of the state will surely increase, public health will be revalued, and there will be room for a universal basic income, where the state provides one universal protection. Currently, state programs are designed for an emergency situation, and the amounts included in these subsidies will decrease.

But the idea that the state must maintain a minimum network of universal protection, of which each one can make use, adjusted to their individual needs, can profoundly transform the way in which citizens understand their duties and rights towards the state. (Chernilo, 2020, author's translation)

An increase in inequality and poverty is one of the greatest challenges Chile and the region face as a result of the economic recession. The economies depend fundamentally on exports of natural resources. One of the essential lessons is to adopt medium- and long-term strategies that transcend the geopolitical and ideological disputes of the moment. Regionalism can offer joint answers to shared problems. Likewise, Chile and the region should consider strengthening their industrial, telecommunications, energy, and health policies, making a greater effort to digitize them (Casanova, 2020). Chile faces the pandemic in the midst of one of its deepest crises in recent decades. It certainly has innumerable challenges, including governance and the carrying out of a constituent process. It is crucial for Chilean elites to understand the urgency to carry out a truly participatory and transparent constituent process. It is the opportunity to channel citizen unrest in a democratic and institutional way and to build a better country. In this instance, deep crises have turned into a real opportunity for change. Hopefully willingness, generosity, and wisdom will prevail and recognize the need to transform the state and its bureaucracy to respond to the needs and demands of its inhabitants.

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