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Are Latin American military dictatorships able to successfully democratize?

Keywords

dictatorships, democratization, Latin American politics, Chile

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ABSTRACT

Latin American countries have faced difficulties in regards to establishing a successful democracy, as nations have succumbed to military power in the form of dictatorships. This paper will evaluate the patterns of military dictatorships in Latin America, specifically the rise and fall of the military junta in Chile. Furthermore, the factors that enabled democratization will be examined to demonstrate that achieving democracy is possible for Latin American nations.

Democracy is the most popular form of government across the globe due to its resounding approval from world powers such as the United States. However, achieving a successful democracy in Latin America has proven to be difficult as most Latin American nations have succumbed to military power in the form of dictatorships. What is the likelihood that Latin American military dictatorships democratize? I argue that for military dictatorships to democratize the military officials that have achieved power must be publicly opposed by the citizens, and the military also must consent to leave their positions of power. In this paper, I demonstrate that democratization is possible in countries where authoritarian regimes exist with evidence that supports the notion that militaries only do what is in their best interest when threatened by the mobilization of citizens opposed to their authority. The next section reviews the literature on how others have tried to answer this question and offers a path forward to study the concept differently. I then conduct a case study, or quantitative analysis before concluding with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

According to Barbara Geddes, when the leader of an autocratic regime loses power, one of three things can happen, the first being the incumbent leadership group is replaced by democratically elected leaders. Another possibility is that someone from the

incumbent leadership group replaces him, and the regime persists. Or, the incumbent leadership group loses control to a different group that replaces it. The latter became rampant in Latin America throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the form of military dictatorships. Democratic leaders were being overthrown in coups d'états and were replaced by military juntas. A military dictatorship is a regime where power was obtained through a coup which is typically enacted with the use of violence against the preexisting state. The defining feature of the military dictatorship is that the highest governmental officials have served (or continue to serve) in the armed forces and the governors are primarily dependent on the support of the officer corps for the retention of power (Wintrobe). Moreover, the classic means for a dictator to accumulate and maintain political power over the citizens is through political repression (Wintrobe). This paper will specifically focus on the military dictatorships in Latin America that have worked toward democratization, particularly in the case of Chile.

If a government becomes unstable, it is not uncommon for citizens to ask their militaries to intervene and take over the executive political power in their country. Generally, when this occurs the military will place themselves in power without democratic processes. This method was prominent in the Cold War era, especially in Latin America. The typical attributes of a nation that was vulnerable to a military coup are a

weak state authority, imminent foreign threats, ethnic or sectarian competition for the control of the executive, natural resource wealth. Recent wars of independence or civil wars may also elevate the military to a prominent political role and thus enhance capacity for government to intervene (Svolik). Usually, governments that are overthrown by militaries are preceded by eras of turbulence. The issue in Latin American nations was that they generally had weak state authorities. The state authority in Latin America was unable to support the social demands of their citizens which ultimately led to dissatisfaction in the power of the government.

Additionally, in Latin America the challenge to maintain democracy derives from the fact that the military power was able to easily dominate the civilian government (Rosenberg). In other words, the militaries in Latin America often had more power than the governments themselves. This concept is frequently labeled as the civil military problematique. In this circumstance, the relationship between the civilian government and the military becomes complicated because without funding for the military, the security of the nation could be jeopardized. However, if the weak civilian government continues to fund the military it can become a threat to the security of democracy. The difficulty for countries in Latin America was giving the military legitimate power, but also ensuring that it did not become an internal threat to the sovereignty of the nation. Governments that have no power over their military forces are easier to overthrow. Likewise, in societies with very high levels of inequality, the society is more likely to be nondemocratic (either oligarchic or a military dictatorship). In these cases, spending more money on the military would be problematic considering the government is already in a weakened environment. Spending more money on the

military would only serve to weaken the government as the central power to a larger extent causing it to be insecure. (Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigni). Furthermore, economic inequality or ethnic and religious divisions determine the form and magnitude of the policy wide political conflict (Svolik). This was a driving force in Chile as many people were divided in support or opposition to the political ideology of Allende.

When militaries acquire a stronghold on political power there are a variety of reasons that they maintain power for extended periods of time. Primarily, the violent overthrow of a totalitarian government in the form of a military dictatorship is a vicious cycle (Tesar and Wilson). The most common method of attempting to overthrow governments in power is in the form of revolution. However, the likelihood of long-term success is rather small if the “revolutionary” route is attempted (Tesar and Wilson). Additionally, even if the revolution is successful, the fall of a dictator is hardly ever accompanied by the fall of the dictatorship (Tesar and Wilson). Therefore, the system in place that the people are in opposition to does not change in their favor, despite their efforts.

Repression is the technique used by dictators to maintain their authority in politics. Popular restrictions placed on citizens under military dictatorships are as follows: restrictions on freedom of press, the rights of opposition parties to campaign against the government, and outright prohibition of groups, associations, or political parties opposed to the government (Wintrobe). The common denominator between these restrictions is that they prohibit the people from criticizing the government. In the case of Chile, the military junta exercised their power by condemning people in society that openly spoke out against the country’s leadership. The junta in Chile is known for

violating human rights during this era by torturing and imprisoning people that did not support the new government.

Although repression was an effective method in oppressing citizens it was not effective enough to deter citizens from overthrowing the military governments. Typically, leaders of military dictatorships are less likely to survive in office than leaders of nonmilitary ones (Svolik). This could be due to the concept that military dictatorships have a disadvantage at accumulating political loyalty (Wintrobe). This is an easy concept to understand as the military-style regimes are not democratically elected by the people and the regimes are known for repressing the rights of citizens. Countercoups are quite common in military governments as citizens attempt to win back power from the nondemocratic regime (Wintrobe). Countercoups were twice as likely in a military as in a civilian regime, and the vast majority of countercoups involve the overthrow of one military government and its replacement by another (Wintrobe). As demonstrated previously, violent overthrows can start vicious cycles which only result in another military government taking power.

The voluntary transfer of power to civilian regimes has been known to occur, despite the violence these regimes face (Wintrobe). Of the 51 military dictators in the world that transitioned peacefully to a civilian government, none of them were killed (Ju). In comparison, 28 out of 203 military dictators were killed when transitioning power from one dictator to another (Ju). The threat of violence against the military regime ironically leads them to submit to civilian-led governments.

Nations in Latin America have been able to achieve democracy after military authority. It is argued that after a military regime has

fallen from power the first issue to be solved is the solution of what to do with previous leaders (Rosenberg). In Chile, Pinochet continued serving in the Chilean military after his dictatorship came to an end. This demonstrates the idea that even under democracy, military leaders remain secure in the knowledge that their crimes will be judged in friendly military courts or not at all after their junta ends because the newly democratic states are too weak to guarantee that the juntas will not return to power (Rosenberg). With the looming power of a possible reemergence of military authority, newly appointed democratic leaders have been known to be lenient in regards to previous oppressive leaders. Despite being democratic, nations in Latin America know they only remain democratic as long as the military is in support of the democratic decisions. Rosenberg argues that trials for previous leaders are crucial for democracy's long-term health, but they are seldom attempted. She uses the example of the three military uprisings in Argentina that occurred when Alfonsín, the new democratic leader, attempted to hold trials for his military predecessors. The uprisings were enough for Alfonsín to end the trials. The legacy of military dictatorships can hamper newly elected democratic officials if the preceding regime leaders continue to hold some form of power in society.

Case Study: Chile

In Chile, the military dictatorship came to power due to the era of turbulence that preceded to military takeover. The opposition to the civil government began after the election of Salvador Allende; his government was predominantly Marxist and they were dedicated to changing the economic, political, and social structures in Chile (Valenzuela). Unfortunately, the Chilean political environment was extremely polarized and there was a large percentage

of citizens that wanted Allende out of office (Valenzuela). Ultimately, the opposition to Allende's left wing government resulted in a coup d'état by the military. However, this was not without the help of the United States government which fully endorsed the overthrow of Allende after the Cold War era. The external support from a world power contributed to the military takeover in the name of containing Communism. Despite the United States backing of the Chilean military junta, the turbulent political era leading up to the assassination of Allende was the leading cause in the government overthrow. Citizens throughout Chile wanted to see Allende out of office and they frequently tried to impeach him before resulting to force (Valenzuela). Since the citizens were unable to overthrow Allende through political processes, they turned to their armed forces to intervene in political affairs. On September 11th, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet took over political office from Allende in a bloody coup d'état that was supported by the Chilean citizens, although, assume his power democratically as he was not elected through free and fair elections. September 11th, 1973 marked the beginning of the military junta in Chile.

After the democratic government was overthrown many people were supportive of the Pinochet regime. Initially when Pinochet displaced Allende, people believed that he would only remain in power until the economy was stabilized (Devine). People anticipated that Pinochet would eventually step down from power and organize elections for a new president, but instead he maintained his authoritarian regime for approximately seventeen years. Chilean citizens did not mind when the military remained in power and rounded up people for interrogations because they feared extreme leftists (Devine). They believed Pinochet was reestablishing order and

eliminating any political threats that continued to exist after Allende's demise. This political climate allowed the Chilean military to violate human rights through the use of mass arrests, torture, forced "disappearances," and killings (Devine). Throughout Pinochet's reign, the Chilean people became disenchanted with his authoritarian tactics and wanted to overthrow him. In fact, there was a consensus among the citizens that the president himself had become the chief obstacle to political normalization, but no one believed overthrowing him was worth the risk (Falcoff). Eventually, the majority of the population in Chile was supportive of overthrowing the military junta that had taken over their government undemocratically.

The mobilization of people against the Pinochet regime is eventually what led to the democratization of Chile after the coup. As people began to reject the coup the typical layers of an explosive society began to emerge. Similarly, citizens started to speak out about the abuses of the government; as the issues began to become public information the citizens of Chile gained the support of external forces. O'Donnell and Schmitter stated in *Transitions from Military Rule* that in "Chile, important groups within the Catholic Church rapidly and firmly commit themselves to those values;" the values they are discussing are human rights. This is especially significant because an external group as important as the Catholic Church endorsing human rights in a predominantly Catholic country such as Chile undermines the power of the military government. The public lack of support from citizens in Chile caused the military dictatorship to decide to democratize the government. People were the driving force in the military stepping down from power, but it should be noted that the military acted in their best interest as

they were threatened by external groups such as the Catholic Church and United States which no longer supported them. The military leaders in positions of power began to fear the possibility of a coup against them, and therefore opted for a peaceful transition of power. The military stepped down to ensure their own safety and they believed if they chose to appease the people with democratic elections then they might be able to maintain some form of power. This action led to their downfall as the military leaders were not reelected. This conveys the concept that in circumstances where military

regimes face threats from citizens they will leave their position of power.

The Chilean junta supports many of the theories discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, it is likely that, in the event that another military dictatorship occurs in Latin America, it will probably follow the same process that Chile demonstrated. Ultimately, it would seem by Chile's example that Latin American nations are able to democratize successfully given that the military in power steps down.

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