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Dinosaur dictator attains political eternity: Thousands died or disappeared in Chile under Pinochet's regime, but he won support by creating 'elephants in the desert' to bring prosperity. Now he's a senator-for-life.

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Illustrations: Photo: Santiago Llanquin, Associated Press / EMOTIONS ARE HIGH: Demonstrators carry posters which read "Pinochet divides the nation" Monday in downtown Santiago.

Photo: Mya Thaug, Special to the Sun / TWO CITYSCAPES: The posh Las Condes neighbourhood resembles Beverly Hills and is home to Pinochet supporters who have profited under his rule.

Photo: Mya Thaug, Special to the Sun / La Victoria used to be a hotbed of opposition to the dictator, but only the graffiti remains.

Photo: Santiago Llanquin, Associated Press / RETIRED TO THE SENATE: Augusto Pinochet is shown on March 6 as he left the armed forces.

SANTIAGO, Chile -- The ghosts of Chile's past are sleepwalking, disturbed from a fitful slumber by the turbulence and tension of the current political crisis. They appear in the faces of those who suffered during 17-years of a military dictatorship and in the hallways of buildings still scarred with the wounds of a violent past.

The crisis, which newspapers here have been predicting for weeks, surrounds the figure at the heart of Chile, a man both reviled and respected, who has created misery and despair for some and wealth and stability for others. At 82, General Augusto Pinochet, who has become known as the "dinosaur" of Latin American dictators, promises political eternity.

Today he becomes a "senator-for-life," leaving behind his post as chief of the armed forces. The Chilean constitution, which Pinochet redesigned in 1980, establishes him in his new post, makes

space for nine other non-elected senators and prevents the president from firing military commanders. Chilean senators have more power than their Canadian counterparts.

Pinochet takes his seat beside officials he once blacklisted after taking power in a violent military coup that lasted 17-years and left more than 3,000 dead or missing. He will have to face Isabel Allende, the daughter of Salvador Allende, the Marxist president who committed suicide rather than surrender during the 1973 coup.

But according to Ascanillo Cavallo, director of Chile's only surviving left-leaning magazine, "He is only one senator out of 48. It's not really important. But it's very symbolic and harder to accept in a democratic institution."

Pinochet's presence in the senate may be mostly symbolic, but he is much more than

just one vote. He received 40 per cent of popular support in the 1988 plebiscite that asked the country if he should continue on as head of state or call an election. He lost, and an election was called, bringing forth a "transitional democracy" that is now almost 10 years old.

But Pinochet's power base remains strong. So strong, says Cavallo, that if he had been on the ballot for the last elections in December, he would have won.

But the concern for those interested in seeing a more complete democracy in Chile is that his presence in the senate, buttressed by the presence of four other military appointees and a right-wing majority, will ensure no reforms such as scrapping Pinochet's appointed senate seats, approving a divorce law, or raising taxes. It also means no challenges to the constitution, which gives the armed forces power over the government.

Gladys Marin, president of the Communist Party, knows just how the army can use this power. Just last year, six years after "democracy" was returned to Chile, she was arrested by 20 plainclothes policemen and put in jail for five days. Her crime was calling Pinochet a "blackmailer and psychopath" at a memorial service for the 3,200 people, including her husband, who were killed or had disappeared during the general's reign. She was sued under a national security law drafted during the dictatorship to prevent defaming elected officials, the military, judiciary or police, but public pressure led to the charges being dropped. The law still exists.

Today, she is heading the first criminal case against Pinochet for crimes committed during his regime. Since she began in

January, more cases have been brought forward. "People weren't aware that there was no democracy in Chile because apparently there was," she said. "Now, with the controversy over Pinochet in the senate, people are waking up to the need for real democracy, for labour laws, divorce laws."

For most Chileans, the topic of Pinochet's ascension to the Senate seems to be either embarrassing, farcical or just not interesting. "Can you believe we're going to be the only country in the world who has a criminal as a senator?" asked a man on the bus. A lawyer at an upscale Santiago cafe, in an area supposedly rife with Pinochet supporters, said this: "Pinochet gave people cellular phones and credit cards ... But people here have no jobs, no opportunities, terrible salaries. For years, they've made serious sacrifices, but they're not living any better."

Everyone in Chile has a political opinion, played out in the recent protests, debates and constitutional challenges to Pinochet's senatorial power. But if there is a hot topic of debate in this country, it should probably not be about Pinochet, but about the people's disenchantment with politics. Evidence of this was obvious in the recent legislative elections, where more than 40 per cent of Chileans of voting age either defaced their ballots, chose no candidates or did not even bother to go to the polls. "The average person sees Pinochet as something that perturbs their life, that will reopen the wounds of the past," said Marin. "And they don't want to disturb the quiet waters."

That's apparently how some people felt at a U2 concert held here at the end of February. When Bono invited Sola Sierra, the leader of the Group of Families of the

Detained and Disappeared, up on stage to speak, half the audience broke into applause and the other into protest. Afterwards protesters said they paid a lot of money for a concert, not a political event.

But for Ana Gonzalez, separating the political from the personal is impossible. Her husband, two sons and daughter-in-law disappeared during the height of the dictatorship. Friends later told her they had seen them being beaten at a military checkpoint and thrown into a van. But that is all she knows. For two decades, the military has denied that they were ever detained. "The worst thing happening here in Chile right now is that there's still no justice," she says explaining how she is a perfect metaphor for her country's current state of democracy. "On the outside, I'm okay. I'm doing well. But on the inside I'm in pain. It's very superficial."

It is that fragile state of living with contradictions that defines so much of life in Chile, and has been the legacy of Pinochet's military rule.

Chile has become two countries, divided between the majority who oppose Pinochet and the minority who support him, between the rich and the poor. Nowhere is that more evident than in Las Condes, an area of Santiago that resembles Beverly Hills more than anything South American. With its new cars, gated mansions and Americanized shops and cafes, it seems the economic policies first implemented by Pinochet in the late '80s have paid off.

But on the other side of the city are the poblaciones, areas like La Victoria, which used to be the former hotbed of the anti-Pinochet movement during the dictatorship. What before were ramshackle

slums, where many were killed, has now become an established community with paved roads, small gardens and children playing. The only remnant of the past seems to be the murals and the graffiti that mark the walls with poetry and folklore dedicated to the dead, the disappeared and those who fought for justice.

It would seem Chile's economic well-being has touched these areas as well. But there are other poblaciones where poverty is more visible. Writer Tomas Moulian, whose recent book *Chile: Anatomy of a Myth*, has been a surprise best-seller, explains: "The poverty in Chile is not the poverty of Brazil. Chilean poverty doesn't show as well."

Where it does show, he says, is in the average salary. "Minimum wage here is about \$250 Cdn a month, but the cost of goods is similar to Canada. A meal at a restaurant, on the low-end, costs \$6 to 10; a newspaper costs \$1, so does a can of Coke. Gasoline is 70 cents a litre.

Carmen Silva, a well-known painter, lives with those two extremes in her backyard. One side of the main street that runs through her neighbourhood belongs to the rich "Las Condes," and the other side to the poor "Recoleta." "When something happens on the poor side, the police from the rich side don't come to help," she said. "The economic policies begun by Pinochet have increased business with other countries and made Chile rich, but the money doesn't filter down to the people. The new riches of Chile stay with the elite."

The reason for the economic division in Chile goes back a long time. In her historical novel *The House of Spirits*, Isabel Allende wrote: "The upper

middle-class and the economic right who favoured the coup are euphoric ... they stopped talking about politics and accepted the idea that they held economic power, but the military was going to rule."

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The economic justification for Pinochet's continued presence in politics is still prevalent.

"North American business wouldn't be operating in Chile if not for Pinochet," said Hermes Lopez, public relations officer for the armed forces. "Twenty-five years ago, we were a very poor country. We didn't export one grape and now we're renowned for our fruit, wood, fish. Pinochet created elephants in the desert. That elephant is an economy that has sustained 6.5-per-cent growth for the last 12 years and almost imperceptible inflation. In December 1996, Chile signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with Canada. Chile was B.C.'s 20th largest international export destination last year, accounting for \$61 million of the province's exports.

"Consumerism was a great pharaonic work of Pinochet," wrote Jacobo Timmerman, an Argentine journalist, in his book *Chile: Death in the South*. "Like other dictators who built monumental structures to their eternity, Pinochet kept his country happy with colour TVs from Hong Kong, dolls from Taiwan, cars from Japan and computers from the U.S."

But like the lawyer in upper-class Santiago pointed out, "It takes more than a few televisions to make people happy. This country has lost its custom of community spirit. We've become a country of individualists only looking after their own business interests. It's sad."