

Chile's Pinochet grows stronger

Chile's strongman, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, is the favorite Great Satan of the North American left — a role that he plays with gusto.

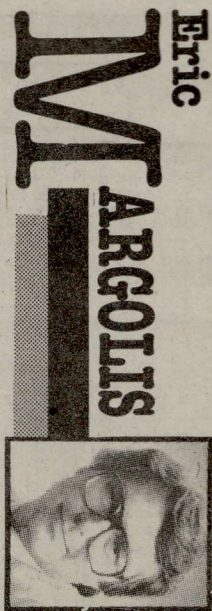
Listening to the rising chorus of criticism in our media against Pinochet, one might readily believe his days are numbered. Perhaps. But based on my recent observations in Latin America, it may turn out that the wicked old general has a lot more staying power than most gringos up here think.

The media has amply reported on the human rights abuses and head-bashing of the Chilean military junta. Particularly here in Toronto where the view of Chile has been strongly biased to the left. Our city has become a haven for communist and left-wing Latin exiles, just as Miami is for Latin rightists.

While the ugly side of the Chilean regime is plain to see, the North American media has done a poor job of reporting on the simmering communist insurgency that continues to threaten Chile. When bombs go off in Chile, our media calls them "protests." When bombs go off in Israel or Rome, they are called "terrorism."

Gringos may be unaware of this problem but a growing number of Chileans are deeply frightened by the very real threat of terrorism or a Marxist takeover.

This fear, sharpened by two recent outrages, has driven many Chileans to renew their support for Pinochet. Support that had been fast dwindling due to severe economic problems and people being fed up with the military regime. The discovery of a huge cache of tons of Soviet weapons convinced many Chileans that the Communist party was on the verge of launching a bloody uprising. Then came the attempt on Pinochet's life that



shocked most Chileans. Like Reagan, a cool and take-charge Pinochet emerged from the ambush of his motorcade looking heroic and macho.

Being macho — mainly is really a better term — is a quality sorely absent among the leaders of the Chilean opposition parties. And here lies the real key to Chile's political problems. The squabbling opposition parties of the Chilean democratic left, centre and right just can't seem to forge effective political unity. It was just such bickering and infighting that allowed the Marxists under Salvador Allende to gain power as a minority government. The Allende regime brought Chile to the edge of economic collapse and social chaos, forcing the armed forces, which had traditionally stayed out of politics, to stage a coup.

Since then, the pot has been simmering in Chile, as both left and right play rough and dirty. Cuba and the Soviet Union have targeted Chile for a major subversive effort at the same time that it has become unpopular abroad. Even some of Pinochet's military supporters in the junta turned against him — until last fall's failed assassination.

But now, quite surprisingly, Pinochet's fortunes are looking up. According to what I recently learned from Chilean communist sources in Brazil, Pinochet is not only gaining strength but is expected, by highly placed communists, to remain in power for years to come. Most interestingly, the communists think that Pinochet will win a national referendum in 1988 and then go on to win free elections as head of his own party.

While the Chilean opposition is in disarray, and incapable of agreeing on a fusion candidate, the indefatigable general is busy building a quite effective grassroots political organization that may well outlast him. Pinochetism without Pinochet, rather like Peronism sans Peron. To many observers, Pinochet is clearly aiming to duplicate the works of Spain's caudillo, Francisco Franco.

Like Franco, Pinochet seems to want to hang his fractious countrymen's heads together until they learn to behave like political adults, and leave his nation with a paternal government that will change into a smoothly functioning democracy, just as Franco so successfully bequeathed a stable democracy to Spain.

A lot of Chileans will prefer this scenario to political chaos or Marxist execution squads roaming the streets of Santiago. They will see Pinochet as a Chilean version of DeGaulle or Franco — neither of whom were gentle with their opponents.

Many outsiders would too if Pinochet would rein in his brutal cops and political police. But the tough general does not seem to care. Telling carping gringos to take a flying leap is not unpopular in Latin America. So don't write of Pinochet yet. The general the liberals love to hate may be around to vex them for quite some time.