

Divergent Paths Toward Democratization:

Chile and Argentina from Military Rule to Civilian Politics

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In the late twentieth century, Chile and Argentina were two of the most closely watched cases of political change in Latin America. Both countries left military rule in the context of what Samuel P. Huntington termed the “third wave” of democratization across the globe.¹ However, the two countries did not make the transition to civilian politics in the same way or with the same legacy of military rule, nor did they use memories of dictatorship in the same way to define democratic legitimacy.² The difference lies not simply in the varying speeds at which these two nations transitioned to democracy but also in their particular historical trajectories. Indeed, Chile and Argentina formed their respective dictatorships in distinct historical conditions, dissolved their dictatorships through separate means, and founded new civilian governments while inheriting differing balances of power between the military, political parties, labor unions, and human rights groups.

This essay argues that Argentina’s transition was shaped by abrupt collapse, while Chile’s was shaped by negotiated withdrawal and institutional continuity. These different exits, in turn, produced different political uses of memory. In Argentina, the defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas War undermined the legitimacy of the Argentine military junta, providing Raúl Alfonsín, the opposition leader elected president in October 1983, with an opportunity to pursue a more active democratic transition. In Chile, on the contrary, Augusto Pinochet’s government retained considerable constitutional and military powers even after losing the plebiscite in 1988; the transition here began under more constrained circumstances, namely a

context of institutional stability.³ These different exits mattered because they shaped how each country confronted the armed forces, organized civilian power, and decided whether democratic legitimacy would rest on immediate condemnation, mediated truth-telling, or gradual accountability after dictatorship.

The contrast is clearest when the story is narrated as political history, with Huntington's typology over "replacement vs transplacement" used only to clarify the historical mechanics of regime exit. The following pages combine a review of secondary literature with analysis of key primary texts, including Chile's 1980 Constitution, the CONADEP report *Nunca Más*, and the Rettig Report, which show how each transition defined authority, justice, and public memory after the transition to democracy. In this limited sense, Huntington's distinction between "replacement" and "transplacement" helps translate the historical contrast into comparative terms. Replacement means a regime has lost its bargaining power but retains its organizational and coercive capacities. Transplacement means a transition took place within the parameters set by the departing dictatorship itself.⁴ Once those differences are placed at the center of the analysis, later divergences in civil-military conflict, party politics, labor mobilization, and transitional justice become easier to explain.

The Construction of Military Rule

The military regimes of Chile and Argentina did not emerge under the same political conditions. Chile began the 1970s with a well-established constitutional tradition; however, this tradition crumbled under the combined strain of political polarization, economic instability, and increasing tensions within President Salvador Allende's government. The September 1973 coup overthrew a democratically elected government and replaced it with a dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet. Yet Pinochet's regime was characterized not only by military rule; it was also

a constitutional project.⁵ In fact, the promulgation of the 1980 Constitution, in particular the role assigned to the armed forces and the broader network of authoritarian enclaves it created, paradoxically helped to preserve military influence beyond any eventual return to elections.

This institutionalization gave the Chilean regime unusual durability compared to other dictatorships. The Pinochet government linked repression with constitutional engineering and attempted to ensure the transformation of military rule into a stable political order. The constitution and organic laws preserved appointed senators, reinforced the National Security Council, and restricted the range of institutional options available to future civilian governments.⁶ The binomial electoral system also allowed right-wing elements to maintain disproportionate influence in the post-authoritarian period. The significance of this system was apparent in the late 1980s. Even after Pinochet conceded electoral defeat in 1988, civilian rule was still being exercised through a system that was designed to preserve the military, empower the right, and prevent constitutional reforms. Indeed, the process of democratization in Chile was launched against the backdrop of an institutional structure featuring considerable veto powers. Article 90 of the Constitution, enacted in 1980, further solidified the nature of this structure when stating that the armed forces were “indispensable to ensure the security of the nation” and established to maintain “the institutional order of the Republic.”⁷

While the 1980 Constitution was adopted under authoritarian circumstances, it nevertheless endowed the regime with a formal legal timetable and a discourse of managed normalization.⁸ This mattered because it linked future elections to a constitutional order designed by the regime itself. It implied that the dictatorship was able to conceive of a future where elections would take place without sacrificing the strategic benefits of military rule. Thus, a democratic opening would not necessarily require the removal of the armed forces from the

center of the political equation. It could do so within a framework that maintained military tutelage, blocked any attempt at majoritarian change, and preserved the constitutional legacy of the regime. Indeed, Article 6 required state bodies to “guarantee the institutional order of the Republic,” a phrase that treated preservation of the regime’s political order as a constitutional duty rather than a temporary emergency measure.⁹

By contrast, Argentina’s dictatorship emerged from a longer cycle of conflict between Peronism and anti-Peronism, which was itself characterized by repeated military intervention. The major political divide was not merely that of dictatorship vs. democracy but also characterized by the struggle between political factions. Since the mid-twentieth century, Peronism, the mass political movement associated with Juan Domingo Perón, mobilized large sections of the Argentine working class and poor at large via its union and party organizations, but anti-Peronist forces within the military, traditional elites, and political parties saw any resurfacing of Peronism as a threat to stability.¹⁰ When it assumed power in 1976, the military junta led by Jorge Rafael Videla and his successors found a polarized political environment characterized by coups, repression, and increasing internal strife within Peronism. This divided political landscape meant, in turn, that the new regime had little opportunity for political institutionalization; unlike Pinochet’s Chile, it could not and did not leave a legacy of constitutional durability that could drive the process on its own terms.

The Argentine regime was marked by a lack of constitutional entrenchment. The junta was maintained via repression, censorship, and the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, the junta’s official program of national reorganization. As such, it was unable to establish an institutional settlement that could transcend its tenure in office. As the junta started to disintegrate, it had fewer tools at its disposal for its transition out of office.¹¹ Moreover, the

regime's infamous Dirty War, a campaign of kidnapping, torture, and disappearance against suspected opponents, also resulted in the weakening of civil society while producing moral outrage. The 1984 *Nunca Más* report later described the armed forces as answering insurgent violence with "a terrorism far worse than that which they were combating."¹² These factors help to explain why Argentina's transition to democracy opened with greater moral force than Chile's but also less institutional predictability.

Argentina followed a more erratic pattern of political disintegration to arrive at its dictatorship. The failure of the previous political system culminated with Perón's overthrow in 1955, but it did not lead to a consolidated anti-Peronist republic; instead, what followed was repeated episodes of proscription, intermittent civilian rule, military intervention, and resurgent political mobilization. By the 1970s, political violence had become inextricably connected to the larger problem of representation. Armed groups, repression, intra-Peronist factionalism, and inability of civilian institutions to contain mass conflict created a situation where the armed forces presented themselves as harbingers of stability in 1976. In sum, the junta was born out of a history of failed compromises rather than a genuine attempt to forge a new constitution.

Crisis and Exit from Dictatorship

These different foundations shaped how the two regimes exited dictatorship in the 1980s. In Argentina, the defeat of the junta in the Falkland-Malvinas conflict contributed to a general crisis of government, which was exacerbated further by economic collapse, debt, inflation, and social unrest.¹³ The resumption of elections in 1983 was not the result of a meticulously crafted schedule set by the authoritarian regime. It was instead a consequence of the regime's loss of legitimacy. Alfonsín's election on October 30, 1983, gave the new civilian government a

significant degree of symbolic legitimacy as the dictatorship had been discredited before the transfer of power.

The transition in Chile followed a more calculated path. The result of the 1988 plebiscite forced Pinochet to accept electoral loss, but the regime was still in charge of the constitutional environment in which the transition was taking place. The presidential elections held on December 14, 1989, and the inauguration of Patricio Aylwin in March 1990 marked the beginning of nominally democratic rule, but in practice the new government was being formed under the umbrella of the dictatorship. Pinochet was still the army's commander-in-chief, the National Security Council gave the military significant weight, right-wing senators retained significant political sway, and the military had privileged access to resources.¹⁴ The shift from authoritarian to civilian government was certainly real, but it was also structured by rules that were meant to limit how far democratization could proceed.

The end of the Argentine dictatorship was the result of military as well as political factors. The military defeat in the war was significant, as it symbolized the incompetence of the junta, though its effects were compounded by the social conditions that had been present before the military intervention. The rise in inflation, fall in wages, and surge of open protest against the government made it difficult for the military to portray themselves as the only force for order. Human rights activism was also significant. In particular, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an association led by relatives of the disappeared, fought to keep state violence at the center of the democratic opposition even before the election.¹⁵

As for Chile, the plebiscite was important not only because of Pinochet's defeat but also because it gave Chile an opposition coalition before the transition. The campaign for a "No" vote in the plebiscite served to prove to all parties, which had been suspicious of each other, how to

work together in a way that would reach a wider constituency. The center-left *Concertación* coalition was not only an electoral winner but also a conduit between the anti-dictatorial opposition and a new stable phase of civilian rule.¹⁶ This organizational continuity would later prove just as important in explaining why Chile's post-authoritarian politics became more governable than Argentina's.

Civilian Governments and the Armed Forces

The initial civilian governments formed in each country offer a glimpse into the consequences of each transition. In Argentina, Alfonsín made critical moves to signal a moral and political break with the dictatorship. The work of CONADEP, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, and the 1985 Trial of the Juntas, in which former commanders were prosecuted in civilian court, bestowed upon the new democracy a particularly robust discourse of civic legitimacy. Prosecutor Julio César Strassera made that moral logic explicit in his closing words, “*Señores, jueces: Nunca más,*” turning the trial into a public repudiation of military rule.¹⁷ However, this moral clarity was accompanied by institutional weakness. The armed forces had clearly lost prestige but still possessed the ability to organize a collective resistance. Military rebellions, especially the ones related to the *carapintadas*, nationalist military rebels who staged uprisings against civilian accountability efforts, demonstrated the weakness of civilian rule and forced the government to make concessions. The *Punto Final* and *Obediencia Debida* laws, which sharply limited prosecutions of military personnel, did not simply symbolize the moderation of the government; they symbolized the moment when the democratic state realized that its control over the armed forces was not total.

In Chile, the “No” campaign, in which the opposition coalition that urged voters to reject Pinochet's continued rule in the 1988 plebiscite, deserves special attention. It included traditional

parties, moderate leftists, Christian Democrats, human rights activists, and segments of civil society that had not always trusted each other during the dictatorship. Although electoral discipline did not overcome existing ideological cleavages, it encouraged the practice of building coalitions that would later help with governing within a limited institutional space. Thus, the transition in Chile was the result of not only an elite bargain but also the creation of an extensive opposition coalition capable of acting within the limited space allowed for by the authoritarian constitution.¹⁸

The material aspects of this settlement were not insignificant. The civilian government in Chile did not immediately exercise normal political control over the armed forces in the same way that established democracies do. Limitations regarding military finance, command continuity, and constitutional guarantees restricted the initial scope of civilian influence.¹⁹ However, the civilian government utilized normal bureaucratic, budgetary, and appointment policies to maximize their scope of action. Thus, the transition was not simply a result of high-profile political events like the 1988 plebiscite or the 1991 Rettig Report released by the truth commission charged with reporting on killings and disappearances under the dictatorship, but also of less visible struggles within the state itself. These bureaucratic struggles were relevant in determining whether democracy would remain merely protected or gradually become more civilian in character. As the Rettig Report observed, by the time of the transition, “human rights stood as the preeminent notion of political ethics,” showing that truth-telling had become central to Chile’s democratic self-understanding even before broader accountability was politically possible.²⁰

The new democratic government in Argentina was also dealing with a broader problem of governability. The instability of the Argentine economy and the unresolved presence of the

Peronist opposition further exacerbated the gap between democratic legitimacy and governability.²¹ Alfonsín was able to articulate a rhetoric of democratic renewal, but his government was structurally weak and politically overstretched. Even after the threat of direct military intervention had passed, the new democracy was still operating in an environment of constant pressure from political polarization and fragmentation. Thus, Argentina's transition was marked by a greater moral break with the past than Chile's transition, but it was also marked by a more vulnerable civilian government.

The symbolic weight of Argentina's democratic opening stemmed from its public rejection of the regime's legitimacy in matters of patriotic authority. In the Trial of the Juntas, the democratic state did more than simply punish former commanders; it created a new civic story in which military rule became synonymous with illegality, obscurantism, and national shame.²² In this sense, Argentina's democracy found a moral voice that many post-authoritarian regimes did not have. However, the public nature of this confrontation also made clear the significance of the concessions Alfonsín was forced to make to rebellious officers, especially the laws that curtailed prosecutions after military pressure. Every concession symbolized a limit to the new state's ability to enforce democratic law against those who possessed weapons, social networks, and political capital in the armed forces.²³ The contrast with Chile was not a matter of moral seriousness alone; it reflected the narrower range of politically viable options facing Chilean leaders. Prosecutor Strassera echoed this sentiment when he urged Argentines to build peace "not on forgetfulness but on memory, not on violence but on justice," a formulation that tied democratic legitimacy to public remembrance rather than negotiated silence.²⁴

An abundance of caution did not mean that Chilean leaders avoided all conflict. Human rights issues remained highly political, and the armed forces consistently demonstrated their

willingness to oppose any swift reassessment of their role. The *Ejercicio de Enlace* and *Boinazo* incidents of the early 1990s, in which the military used pressure tactics, including troop mobilization and visible military signaling, to warn civilian leaders against moving too aggressively against the armed forces, showed that military pressure was still significant even with a civilian administration.²⁵ However, the Chilean leadership treated these issues as problems to be managed rather than a battleground where the legitimacy of democracy had to be proven. Thus, they opted for a gradual, less noticeable, yet perhaps more lasting process of democratization. The state managed to do this with sufficient caution to avert a dramatic rupture, while leaving enough room for future accountability and eventual reductions in military prerogatives. Patricio Aylwin's government, which was inaugurated in 1990, reinforced this strategy through careful personnel and institutional choices. The appointment of civilian defense leaders and the measured assertion of authority over promotions were part of a broader approach that sought to address the history of prior abuses without directly provoking military disloyalty.²⁶

In Chile, the former military regime had clearly lost the 1988 plebiscite but retained strong institutional power. As a result, civilian leaders faced the problem of distinguishing between normative desire and practical possibility. This led to a strategy of incremental encroachment on the military's prerogatives rather than a thorough attempt to reverse them.

Parties, Unions, and Social Mobilization

The divergence between the two nations was also evident in the relationship between the state and social mobilization. The period of Argentine democracy after 1983 was marked by a struggle between the state, Peronist trade unions, and other social groups. The General Confederation of Labor and other labor networks allied with the Peronist movement, using strikes and demonstrations as a means of political pressure.²⁷ This pattern reflected more than

simple distributive conflict; it also highlighted the underlying divide between Peronists and anti-Peronists, as well as the absence of a broad consensus in post-authoritarian politics on how to bring contending forces together within a shared political framework. Thus, Argentina's democracy was characterized simultaneously by electoral legitimacy and political instability.

The underlying factors of this conflict lie in the political history of Peronism. In the 1960s and 1970s, Peronism fragmented into right- and left-wing currents, each of which had its own strategies and bases of support. The restoration of civilian rule in 1983 did not overcome this division; it merely transplanted them into a new framework.²⁸ Labor activism, party rivalry, and debates over memory and justice remained trapped within the Peronist framework that had plagued Argentine politics long before the 1976 coup d'état. In this sense, democratization did not signal a new political field in Argentina; it was a reinstatement of an old field within newly defined constitutional rules.

On the other hand, Chile was politically more stable. However, this must not be understood as an absence of tension but rather as the ability of the government to channel tension in ways that did not endanger the regime. Indeed, the very same tensions over memory and truth that exposed state weakness in Argentina were contained in Chile.²⁹ The *Concertación*, the center-left coalition that governed Chile after 1990, faced the danger of losing its left-wing members but still enjoyed sufficient internal cohesion between its constituents to successfully run the country.

By contrast, Argentina lacked a similar centering coalition during its transition period. Although Argentina's main democratic discourse often started in civil society's denunciation of the dictatorship, such a discourse alone was not sufficient for building a ruling majority capable of controlling the military, negotiating labor strikes, and stabilizing policy. As a result, labor

conflict in Argentina became increasingly intractable. Strikes became a constant strain on the democratic government, and the growing rate of inflation and debt reduced the scope of government maneuverability.³⁰ In this sense, the building of democracy in Argentina was circumscribed by factors beyond the issue of the military, namely the enduring presence of powerful social actors whose political influence had consolidated during a long history of conflict between Peronist mass politics and anti-Peronist institutions.

In Chile, the *Concertación* coalition continued to define the rules for Chilean politics in the 1990s and 2000s.³¹ Although it was not devoid of internal conflicts and was unable to eliminate inequality and military pressures, it was able to create a relatively unified civilian center of power. The principal labor organization, the CUT, continued to denounce the effects of neoliberalism, although labor politics in democratic Chile did not produce the same type of pattern of national confrontation that undermined the Alfonsín government.

These different relationships between state and social mobilization help explain why the Chilean transition appears to be both limited *and* lasting. The “No” campaign of 1988 served to construct not only an electoral alliance but also a broader political agreement in which the anti-dictatorial opposition accepted gradual institutional reform in return for access to government.³² While this settlement proved troublesome for many victims and activists, it nonetheless helped consolidate the newly formed democratic state. Argentina did not achieve a similar settlement. There, the anti-dictatorial consensus had considerable moral power, but it failed to produce a stable governing arrangement that satisfied the major social forces.

Justice, Memory, and the Afterlife of Transition

This contrast between Argentina and Chile is further reinforced by the afterlives of democratic transition. Through the 1990s, Chile remained a protected democracy rather than a

fully unconstrained one. Its civilian governments inherited a diverse set of authoritarian legacies, which included military autonomy, appointed senators, constitutional restrictions, and the significant political shadow cast by Pinochet.³³ Over time, the governments gradually eroded these major authoritarian holdovers. Civilian control was incrementally extended, judicial doctrine developed, and political space increased. A critical moment of change occurred in 1998 when Pinochet was detained in London, which challenged the aura of impunity that surrounded the former dictator and the institutional framework he had created.

The Chilean case is particularly important because it showed that even where there were substantial institutional constraints on democratization, the process could still be advanced. The government of the *Concertación* did not immediately overcome the authoritarian holdovers but instead worked to erode them systematically through a series of calculated decisions regarding ministerial appointments, judicial support, military budget allocations, and more broadly the strengthening of civilian authority.³⁴ This strategy depended not on a singular crucial breakthrough but rather the gradual pressure applied over a long period of time. What could be perceived by outside observers as an unexpected or even anomalous stability was, in fact, the result of calculated politics intended to curb the military's residual autonomy without triggering a direct conflict.

The developments that followed reinforced this trend. Measures like the 1999 *Mesa de Diálogo* forum, which addressed the fate of the disappeared, and the 2004 Valech Commission, which documented imprisonment and torture, were examples of attempts to expand truth-seeking and accountability without immediately triggering a political crisis.³⁵ These actions admittedly did not suffice to meet all demands for justice and did not eliminate the compromises made during the transition period; however, they do show that the Chilean democracy of the early

1990s was not static. Civilian governments, judges, and human rights advocates gradually extended the reach of democratic accountability, even in an institutional setting created to limit such action.

By contrast, human rights politics mattered to democratic legitimacy in different ways and developed different temporalities in Argentina. Here, the pursuit of justice was intertwined with the democratic transition in its most immediate and maximal form, as the delegitimization of the preceding regime made possible immediate accountability. In the Chilean case, memory politics developed within state institutions as a matter of substantive accountability only *after* a period of more limited truth-telling and reparations.³⁶ This is not to suggest that one of these paths was somehow morally superior. Rather, each reflected the political equilibrium that existed at the time of transition. Nevertheless, these differing equilibriums determined whether democracy's legitimacy lay more in immediate condemnation or incremental political progress; in other words, it defined the possible moral language of democracy itself.

In Chile, gradualism was grounded in official language from the start. The decree establishing the truth commission declared that "the moral conscience of the Nation demands that the truth" about grave human-rights violations "be brought to light," suggesting that truth-telling was understood as a foundation of democratic legitimacy even before wider criminal accountability became politically feasible.³⁷ The judiciary, for example, changed gradually rather than through a single dramatic reform, and it re-established channels for accountability, in part, by refusing to grant blanket immunity for disappearances and other ongoing crimes.³⁸ The rule of the *Concertación* was marked by caution without passivity. It was a twofold strategy: the maintenance of institutional order in the short term, alongside the use of commissions, law reinterpretation, and political management to gradually erode the holdover spaces held captive

by the dictatorship. Thus, Chilean democracy was limited at its birth but became more civilian and responsible with the accumulation of changes .

Argentina's democratic trajectory under Carlos Menem, the Peronist president elected in 1989, was in some ways the inverse of Chile's. While the immediate danger of a barracks rebellion had largely diminished,³⁹ the democratic state also withdrew from the morally assertive position that had been characteristic of the early years of Alfonsín's government. Politically, the result was a repeat of the fundamental problem that had plagued the earlier transition period: the state could not simultaneously sustain maximal accountability *and* governability. The issue was not democracy itself but rather whether democracy could be sustained within the unresolved framework of Peronist mass politics without negotiating the legacy of military power.

Seen from this longer time frame, the Argentine experience of democracy took a different course. Although the collapse of the dictatorship created a clearer moral break with the past than Chile managed, it did not immediately result in a similar level of governability. Civil-military conflict, economic instability, and political polarization made the first decade of Argentine democracy a volatile period. Even after the military ceased to be an immediate coup risk, the democratic state remained tainted by concessions to dictatorial elites and the lingering political presence of Peronist labor networks. Menem's presidency marked a different form of civilian rule, but it did not overcome the problems of earlier periods.⁴⁰ The result was a democracy that was unquestionably real, but one whose first years were marked by fragility rather than institutional consolidation.

Conclusion

What the democratizations of Argentina and Chile demonstrate is that post-authoritarian politics depends not only on the fall of dictatorship but also on the terms under which civilian

governments inherit the state. The precipitous collapse of Argentina allowed the new democracy to articulate a more stringent rhetoric of moral condemnation, but it also forced civilian leaders to rule with neither a settlement with the armed forces nor an agreement with major mass political organizations.⁴¹ In Chile, the negotiated withdrawal from power created harsher limits at the beginning, but it also created a much more stable, albeit highly constrained, context for democratic consolidation. In both cases, building democracy was a political process in which elections were necessary but insufficient conditions for a successful transition. Therefore, a comparative analysis of the two countries' experiences must go far beyond a reductionist approach of comparing "stable" and "unstable" democracies. Instead, it must account for how those democracies evolved in the first place—in this case, the juxtaposition of a democracy that emerges through conflict with one that emerges through negotiation.

Argentina's transition started with a strong repudiation of the dictatorship, whereas Chile's transition started with greater guarantees for its departing rulers. These initial differences shaped the following two decades of political life in paradoxical ways. In Argentina, democratic legitimacy preceded the consolidation of institutional control; in Chile, institutional control preceded the consolidation of democracy.⁴² The political histories of both countries reveal that the end of military rule is not tantamount to the end of the struggle for a democratic state. Instead, it marks the beginning of a new arena in which constitutions, parties, unions, courts, and memories of violence continue to determine what democracy can become.

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