

Lessons from the coup

It's not easy to 'import' lessons from other parts of the world. But South Africans on the brink of democracy can learn a lot from the Chilean coup of 1973.

Part of our problem was the narrow election victory achieved by the coalition of popular forces in the 1970 election. The coalition had a relatively weak majority of about 37%, which meant there was a lot of space in which forces opposed to change could organise.

It started to happen soon after Dr Salvador Allende won the election; Richard Nixon was in the White House, Henry Kissinger was head of state, and together they plotted to squash the process of change in Chile.

They used a range of methods, both clandestine and legal.

They pushed extreme rightwing groupings to violence — the most important of which was the assassination of the commander-in-chief of the army, General Rene Schneider, who was a 'constitutionalist'. Then the CIA started to finance rightwing newspapers and radio stations, as well as political parties and rightwing paramilitary groups.

Blockades

On the legal side, the US organised an economic blockade. Up until then, Chile had received a lot of loans and credits. But under the Allende government, the country didn't receive a cent.

One of the first economic measures undertaken by the Allende government was to nationalise the copper mines, one of the cornerstones of the economy, which had been owned by US corporations. The high rate of compensation sought by these companies was rejected by Allende, which led to a series of international boycotts and embargoes organised by the US.

Inside the country, the CIA and the wealthy Chilean classes organised — and financed — protests against the government.

For example, for two months they practically paralysed the transport system with a truckdrivers' strike which also blocked highways and roads. This led to supply shortages in the cities. They also organised protest actions by small retailers and businessmen.

Distortions

But we made our own mistakes, too. The political forces backing the government of Popular Unity (UP) lacked the capacity to mobilise and organise the people. We suffered some political and ideological distortions.

But our biggest problem was the fact that, in the Chilean Left, there was a strong belief that our armed forces were different from their counterparts in other Latin American countries, which had been plagued by coups.

This notion was present among a few of the military commanders of the time, some of whom were later assassinated by General Pinochet's men. The commander of the navy had to be arrested by the coupmakers, for example. The same happened to the chief of the military police.

But generally, we underestimated the ability of the Chilean armed forces to absorb the changes that were occurring.

Other serious errors stemmed from the history of our country. Chile had a long history of democratic governments. Chilean democracy had not suffered any interruption from 1925 until 1973. One product of that political history was an excessive affection and respect for the institutions themselves. And history demonstrated very clearly, at least in our case, that the dominant classes do not share that sort of respect.

If the Chilean experience confirms one thing, it is that the popular forces must prepare for a long and increasingly more complex struggle. And that we must never, ever, trust the enemy. ■

— Manuel Cabieses Donoso



■ TINPOT: Pinochet is no longer president, but he still heads Chile's army

the neoliberal system, despite all the social injustices it is responsible for.

Leftwing alliance

The Chilean Left, which continues to fight for social changes and social justice — a project we still call socialism — is constituted by the Allendist Democratic Movement of the Left (Mida). Mida includes the Communist Party, which retains a national presence and has a strong influence in the union movement. It was, though, hard-hit by the military dictatorship which ruled Chile from 1973 to 1989.

The other members of Mida are six small splinter groups from the Socialist Party and from another group that used to have a strong presence but suffered severe losses during the dictatorship, the Revolutionary Movement of the Left (MIR).

In last year's municipal elections, Mida got 6.4% of the votes. In the coming general election, our strategic target is 10%, or 900 000 votes — which is low but nonetheless would reveal a tremendous degree of consciousness given the current realities. It would also allow us to develop a longer-term political project.

Mida is an experience in development, the seed of a greater force. I don't think it has any similarity to SA. It's a recomposition of the political forces of the Left.

Always a minority

It is today clear (though it's always been *theoretically* clear) that the political Left is not in itself enough to bring about change. It could be very lucid, with a tremendous capacity to lead, but it will always be a minority among the people — a small cadre of leaders selected from among the people, regardless of how big the parties of the Left are.

The Left, which is more than the political parties and organisations, has to understand the broader social sectors. Therefore we should have programmes of struggle that are capable of mobilising and organising huge masses of people. I believe this is not possible using the old party formulas that were used when I was younger. Not only have we suffered an ideological crisis throughout the world, we have also suffered an organic crisis. We need to confront this with clarity and courage.