

Salvador Allende Was Overthrown Because His Government Showed Chile Could Be Transformed

This weekend marks the 48th anniversary of the US-backed coup against Chilean socialist president Salvador Allende. That coup's history is important, but we can't forget that Allende's government also achieved incredible things while in power.



Chilean statesman Salvador Allende (1908–1973) speaks at the closing of the Chilean Communist Party's fifth anniversary. (AFP via Getty Images)

The first commemorative march for Chile's Popular Unity government took place on September 11, 1989. Paying homage to the victims of the military dictatorship, it gathered more than five thousand people at Salvador Allende's then-unmarked tomb in Viña del Mar.

It would also be the final year of Augusto Pinochet's bloody dictatorship. Before stepping down, Pinochet ominously announced on national radio that even in his absence the "struggle against Marxism must go on."

Every year since that date, a commemorative march is held in Santiago de Chile. However, in 2005, the route was reversed so that it would begin, rather than end, at the cemetery and head toward its final destination at the Moneda Palace. The message behind the route change was clear: there will always be a place for the Left to mourn its fallen heroes, but its ultimate destiny lies elsewhere.

The Chilean left also seems to be reversing course in recent years, most spectacularly by winning majority representation in the all-important Constitutional Convention, responsible for rewriting the nation's magna carta.

Amid growing confidence on the Left, many people have also begun to look back with a different attitude on the history of Allende's Popular Unity government (Unidad Popular, UP) — less as a

solemn act of remembrance than an active search for useful political experiences.

Tomás Moulian is known to historians as one of the leading militants of the Popular Unitary Action Movement (MAPU Obrero Campesino), a left-wing party that played a key role in Allende's Popular Unity government. Although later Moulian was nominated as pre-candidate for the Communist Party in the 2005 presidential election, he is perhaps most widely recognized today as a sociologist dedicated to the study of the political economy of Pinochet's dictatorship and as the author of the now classic *Chile actual. Anatomía de un mito (Chile Today: Anatomy of a Myth)*.

Moulian has most recently published a *El gobierno de la Unidad Popular. Para comenzar (The Popular Unity Government: Getting Started)*. Written half a century after the electoral triumph of Salvador Allende and in the midst of Chile's incredible left-wing resurgence, it's a fittingly rigorous study of the policies of Allende's government, meant to transmit real lessons to a Left eager to learn from the past.

Mía Dragnic spoke to Moulian for *Jacobin* to learn more about what it was like to play an active part in the thousand-day Allende government, and about why the Left needs to not just remember but also build new ideas based on the experience of the Popular Unity government.

Mía Dragnic

Where were you on September 11, 1973?

Tomás Moulian

I was in the Bustamante neighborhood of Santiago with my comrade [Manuel Antonio Garretón](#). Our mission that day was to communicate with Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, who was already an important figure during the Allende government and would later become a key figure in the resistance to the dictatorship.

Our mission came from the party in which we were active at the time, the MAPU, which was part of the Popular Unity government coalition. From the Bustamante neighborhood, we could see the planes flying toward La Moneda. We quickly learned about the bombing and communicated with the cardinal. He could already see what was about to unfold in Chile.

Mía Dragnic

Can you say a word about who Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez was and why he was so important?

Tomás Moulian

Of course. During the dictatorship, the conservative sectors of the Church were almost completely sidelined by the figure of the cardinal. And it was he, along with Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish sectors, who early on made the decision to create an institution dedicated to the defense of human rights.

The cardinal eventually caved to pressure from Pinochet and eliminated the first organism dedicated to the defense of human rights, but he created another: the Vicariate of Solidarity, directed by Father Cristián Precht, which was responsible for monitoring abuses under Pinochet. The cardinal appointed a series of attorneys to gather reports and the Church took the lead in the human rights struggle, saving many lives along the way.

Human rights violations during the dictatorship were flagrant, and it was impossible not to know what was going on, despite what some today claim to the contrary. When, for example, the body of Marta Ugarte, a communist militant who had been taken prisoner by the secret police, appeared on the beach of Los Molles, or when General Alberto Bachelet died in a public jail as a victim of torture by his own comrades in the air force, there was no ignoring what was happening.

Mía Dragnic

Going back to September 11, everyone is familiar with the image of the bombing of La Moneda. What's less well understood is why they bombed it.

Tomás Moulian

That's right. It's important to underscore that, militarily speaking, the bombing did not make any sense at all. La Moneda had already been defeated by all branches of the armed forces, which by then had united to overthrow the government. There was no longer any way to resist. So the only thing to conclude is that the bombing had another meaning: it was meant to show that the military was prepared to do anything and everything to overthrow the government.

The bombing was, symbolically, a preview of what was to come later: mass arrests, assassinations, disappearances, and tortures of all kinds. The bodies that the military threw into the sea, in a certain sense, were all foreshadowed in the bombing.

Mía Dragnic

Apart from the military, there were plenty of other forces aligning against the Popular Unity government.

Tomás Moulian

Yes, for starters, the political opposition was just brutal by that point.

Shortly after the parliamentary elections of March 1973, the opposition tried to win the two-thirds vote that it needed in both houses to stage a constitutional coup and remove Allende from power. It did not obtain the votes necessary and, failing to do so, began to see a coup d'état as the only possible solution.

Allende himself had a part to play in the coup. It was Salvador Allende who appointed Augusto Pinochet to replace General Carlos Prats, although he did so following regulations and according to military ranks.

Pinochet had been, until then, a constitutionalist and a defender of the Allende government. But after his appointment as commander in chief of the army, he joined the conspiracy already being organized by other generals, such as Gustavo Leigh and José Merino.



Supporters of Salvador Allende demonstrate in the streets of Santiago on September 12, 1970. (Keystone-France / Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

Mía Dragnic

The economic crisis was also becoming a real problem for the UP government, especially the food shortage.

Tomás Moulian

The crisis had two elements: one was the salary hike carried out by the Popular Unity government, which generated an increase in demand and, as a consequence, hyperinflation. But this increase in demand has to be put in its right context: it was an increase in demand in a country whose imports were restricted (because of an international conspiracy forbidding exports to Chile and because the country did not have enough foreign reserves to obtain the goods necessary to satisfy domestic demand).

But, in addition to the wage increase, there was a second fundamental element: hoarding. The

government tried to deal with this through the Supplies and Prices Board (Junta de Abastecimiento y Precios), but it achieved only partial success. The conspiracy was too strong, and hoarding played an absolutely decisive role in the coup. Shortages accumulated and soon people began to queue for food, and the Popular Unity government's popularity began to decline.

That meant that housewives and homeowners had to spend a large part of the day standing in long lines just to be able to buy the items they needed for their daily lives. That created anger, and anger fed the political opposition.

This came to a head with the October strike, which lasted a month. It began as a regional strike, but it later became national. Transport workers, truck drivers, shopkeepers (both small and large retailers), doctors, high-school and university students all participated.

The interesting thing is that the trade unions did not formulate specific labor demands. Instead, the main slogans of that strike were overwhelmingly political: it was a strike that sought to create chaos so that the government would be forced to resign. But it did not succeed.

The Popular Unity government, although disunited and fragmented, managed to steady the ship and get the country on track despite the October strike. But the truckers, who were the ringleaders of the movement, dug in: they took over the highway and beat up other truckers who continued working (those whom the Popular Unity called "patriotic truckers"). Although they did not succeed at the time, those actions helped to create the conditions for the future coup d'état.

Mía Dragnic

Let's go back in time and talk more about the Popular Unity government. What was it that made it the Popular Unity period a *fiesta*, as so many people at the time referred to it?

Tomás Moulian

The Popular Unity government was a *fiesta* because it mobilized all of Chilean society through the measures it promoted.

What were those measures? First, there was the nationalization of the banks. This happened in an unusual manner, because it was done through the market: the government bought a controlling share of the banks at a relatively high price in order to coax shareholders into selling. And they did so despite attempts by the Christian Democrats and the right wing to convince them not to.

The second major achievement was the nationalization of copper. As is well known, nationalization of copper was approved unanimously in parliament. Thirdly, we might mention the creation of the so-called Social Property Area, which was responsible for requisitioning or expropriating private holdings for social use, starting with the textile companies.

But, above all, what stood out from that period was the organization of social participation through things like "communal commands": popular participation at the municipal level that allowed the bases and the working class to have its say in how their lives were run. The same could be said of the *cordones industriales*, which pursued the same objective but in industries, mainly those that had been expropriated or intervened.

The UP was a *fiesta* because it encouraged citizens to participate in government decisions. When people speak of the UP, they're talking about one thousand days of democratic, peaceful, pluralist socialist government in Chile, with decisions and achievements that represented real changes.

Mía Dragnic

Do you think that the tragic coup that followed has obscured the visceral, lived memory of that "fiesta"?

Tomás Moulian

It would be senseless to argue that a tragedy of that magnitude would not take its toll on the memory of everything that came before. To have everything the government did just erased in that way is more than one can countenance.

What do we — by which I mean society in general — really remember about Allende today?

Basically, we remember his suicide and his speech in the morning hours of September 11, in which he spoke of the great avenues along which the new man will walk, and so on and so forth.

We don't really remember or study all the work and achievements of the UP, which of course is incredibly sad, because it was the most democratic government that Chile ever had.

Mía Dragnic

Some might say that the successive Concertación governments that ruled Chile in the post-dictatorship period were partially responsible for burying that memory.

Tomás Moulian

Yes, they undoubtedly participated in a general tendency to forget all that the UP represented and achieved. That trend began with the government of Patricia Aylwin of the Christian Democratic Party, whose slogan — now laughable — was “justice insofar as it is possible.”

Salvador Allende stood for the complete opposite of this idea: he represented the maximum effort to transform Chilean society, to create a Chilean road to socialism which he himself called “the revolution of empanadas and red wine.” This was forgotten because there was little political interest in remembering it — or better yet, there was a vested interest in forgetting.

For so long, the only memory that remained from that period was that of the coup. I think finally the time has come to remember the rest of the story.

Mía Dragnic

How would you have described Salvador Allende?

Tomás Moulian

Allende was, first of all, a civic hero — someone who gave his life for his ideas. But he was also a great statesman. We should recall, he ran for president four times and served as president of the Senate.

I don't think it would be a stretch to say that, ever since 1952, left-wing politics in Chile has basically revolved around Allende, until Allende decided to commit suicide. Chile, by the way, is known for its political suicides, and there are actually three great ones in our national history: that of president José Manuel Balmaceda, the socialist and working-class hero Luis Emilio Recabarren, and Allende.

Mía Dragnic

Let's go back to 1952, when Allende emerged in national politics as the presidential candidate for the Socialist Party. What did the Chilean political landscape look like back then?

Tomás Moulian

For starters, the right wing had Arturo Matte as its candidate that year. This was important because it was the first time that the conservatives were electing someone from the business class to represent them politically. Matte, we should recall was a member of the Alessandri family, a right-wing political dynasty in Chile. In other words, it was the beginning of what would be the enduring unity of interests between the business class and the Chilean right.

However, Arturo Matte, who was expected to obtain 40 percent, did not reach 20 percent of the vote. It was a heavy defeat for the right-wing candidate and in a sense it marked a sea change that was both more favorable for left-wing politics and that showed that the Right would have trouble achieving its goals through electoral means.

The Chilean left that many people are today familiar with — the Left of the 1970s — got its start back then in 1952 by competing seriously for every presidential election. Allende, we should remember, ran four times: In 1952, then again in the 1958 elections (in which he nearly won, losing by just a few votes to Jorge Alessandri). He was a candidate again in 1964, but lost to Eduardo Frei Montalva.



Chilean soldiers surround La Moneda at 8 AM, September 11, 1973. (Horacio Villalobos / Corbis via Getty Images)

Allende finally won in 1970, although very narrowly: he obtained 36.3 percent of the vote against 34.9 percent for Alessandri. The margin was so narrow that Congress had to make a ruling over who was the victor, and, after much deliberation, they decided in favor of Allende.

Mía Dragnic

Tell me a little about Eduardo Frei Montalva, Allende's immediate predecessor. He inaugurated many reforms that were eventually fulfilled under the Popular Unity government, although he also called for Allende's overthrow by the armed forces in 1973.

Tomás Moulian

As you said, Frei Montalva's term was full of reforms that in a sense anticipated Salvador Allende's government. In 1967 he approved a new Agrarian Reform, achieving important progress in that area. He also passed a peasant unionization law which allowed agricultural workers to form unions, something that had been prohibited until then. In agrarian policy, Frei Montalva's government was advanced.

It also implemented reform in education by increasing compulsory primary education from six to eight years. Frei Montalva also created an institution, the National Council for Popular Promotion, which was in charge of labor issues in the "*callampa* populations" [tent cities] as they were called at that time.

Some of his reforms were also questioned by the Left. One was the so-called Chileanization of copper: the Chilean government bought from US owners a share in the ownership of the copper mines. The Left criticized that move on the grounds that the primary beneficiaries were the mine owners rather than the Chilean people.

In any case, it was thanks in part to those measures that the Popular Unity could try to go even further. And it did. Allende's government advanced much further than Frei Montalva's, but we should not undervalue the fact that it laid some important groundwork.

Mía Dragnic

What did the Popular Unity government look like from the inside?

Tomás Moulian

The Popular Unity was a coalition that succeeded the Popular Action Front (FRAP), a left-wing alliance between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party formed in 1956. That alliance lasted until 1969, when the Popular Unity was founded.

The UP involved a much broader articulation than the FRAP, because it incorporated two new forces: the Radical Party and the MAPU. The Radical Party was an important incorporation: a centrist organization — despite its name — that had turned to the Left and that would go on to play an

important part in the UP.

There were also internal differences. There was a moderate tendency, headed by Salvador Allende himself and the Communist Party, the Radical Party, and a part of the MAPU led by Jaime Gazmuri. The other current was comprised of a more radicalized group, headed by Carlos Altamirano, the Christian Left and the remaining part of the MAPU led by Oscar Guillermo Garretón. The latter was interested in going beyond the Popular Unity program, while the moderate tendency of the MAPU considered that it was necessary to stick to the existing program.

The most radicalized sector looked with suspicion on the possibility of brokering agreements between the Popular Unity and Christian Democracy. Allende, however, supported that effort. He was convinced that the existing bloc had to be broadened and that he needed to include others, even antagonistic sectors, if he was going to be able to realize large-scale transformations through peaceful and institutional means.

Mía Dragnic

What about women's political participation during Allende's government?

Tomás Moulian

Although insufficient, one way to answer that question is by looking at Marta Harnecker and [Beatriz Allende](#)'s role in the Allende government. Marta had become known as a translator of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and for the publication of her book *The Elementary Concepts of Historical Materialism* (1969). Between 1970 and 1973 she was editor of the magazine *Chile hoy*.

She was responsible, for example, for spreading information about the Peruvian progressive military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado. Marta also worked at the School of Economics at the University of Chile, where she participated in the controversies around the theory of dependency.

Beatriz Allende, on the other hand, was the president's closest daughter, and during his government she became one of his closest advisors. She helped him, for example, in his oftentimes tense relationship with the [Movement of the Revolutionary Left \(MIR\)](#).

In any case, the issue of women's participation in politics did not have the precedence it has assumed today. This explains why, in a government that was very advanced, there was no woman minister.

Although Allende tried to create a Ministry of Women's Affairs, the project did not materialize due to internal disagreements. Instead of the ministry, he created the Women's Secretariat.

There were specific areas where women were encouraged to participate politically, like in the textile companies (which had many women workers) and in the Prices and Supplies Board, where a significant part of the leadership was female.

Mía Dragnic

The period in which the UP governed Chile had a few really special highlights. One of the standouts was Fidel Castro's visit to the country.

Tomás Moulian

Absolutely. Castro visited Chile for about a month during the Popular Unity government. In my opinion, the most important thing he did during that time was take a position on the Chilean road to socialism. He spoke in favor of it and expressed his admiration, with all the differences it represented with respect to the Cuban experience.

Castro essentially said that the path taken was the only road the Chilean revolution could take — Chile being a democratic country, he said, the peaceful and institutional transition to socialism was the correct one.

Mía Dragnic

Another special, if more minor, highlight was Allende's creation of the state-backed publishing house Editorial Quimantú. What significance did that initiative hold?

Tomás Moulian

I would actually rate Quimantú as one of the main achievements of Allende's government!

The creation of Quimantú came about when the government bought all the assets of Zigzag Publishing. The Quimantú publishing initiative basically flooded the street with books, many of which already existed — although with limited availability — but others were being printed and put into circulation for the first time. Suddenly there were classics of world literature like Mark Twain, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassan, as well as Chilean and Latin American literature in kiosks across the country, and the shopkeepers realized that there was huge revenue potential in book sales. In concrete terms, what all that meant was that ordinary citizens and workers began to read literature, philosophy, and other works ordinarily regarded as not suitable or of interest to the working class. I think that was extremely powerful.

Mía Dragnic

What about the educational initiative known as the National Unified School? Surely that was another one of the UP's undervalued projects.

Tomás Moulian

Yes, the National Unified School (ENU) was a great effort to improve and democratize Chile's educational system. That proposal had been under discussion with sectors of Christian Democracy. However, when the government finally tried to pass the proposal, the Christian Democrats turned against it.

The ENU was essentially an initiative for educational reform aiming to establish a single system that would guarantee access for low-income students and that would offer greater chances for those sectors to obtain university-level education.

The Catholic Church also came out against the proposal, and they were joined by the armed forces and the navy. Allende was eventually forced to withdraw the project — which caused a lot of internal disagreements within the Popular Unity, especially among the most radicalized sectors and with the MIR.

Mía Dragnic

In closing, what lessons do you think the Chilean left can take from the experience of Allende and the Popular Unity government?

Tomás Moulian

The fundamental lesson of the Popular Unity years is that, despite everything, it is absolutely worth trying to transform Chilean society. Even if, in the end, that experience failed, it still succeeded in putting into question the underlying structure of Chilean society. It set down an example of how, through the participation of the majorities and the involvement of workers, important changes can be won.

The Popular Unity government achieved many things, we mustn't forget this — just as we must remember Salvador Allende's prophecy and realize his dream of opening up the great avenues.