

## What Salvador Allende Feared

**On September 11, 1973, Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende was overthrown in a CIA-backed military coup. In this 1971 interview, published in English for the first time, Allende expressed his fears of internal destabilization and US interference.**



Salvador Allende with Humberto Martones in La Moneda, Santiago, Chile, date unknown. Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile

Almost [five decades](#) since his election, [Salvador Allende](#) remains an icon of democratic socialism. Narrowly winning the 1970 presidential election as leader of the Popular Unity coalition, he launched an ambitious program of nationalizations in order to put working people in charge of the economy. The reaction was fierce, from capital flight to outright sabotage. Targeting Allende as a bitter enemy, US President Richard Nixon said in a meeting with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger he aimed to “make the economy scream.” Nixon and Kissinger had their way on [September 11, 1973](#), as the democratically elected Allende was overthrown in a CIA-backed [military coup](#). After Allende's death, thousands of socialists, communists, and labor activists

were murdered by General Augusto Pinochet's regime, which soon became a testing ground for neoliberal shock therapy. Yet before it became a grim example of elites' willingness to trash democracy, Allende's experiment was itself a beacon for the international left.

A year into Allende's presidency, in October 1971 Rossana Rossanda interviewed him for Italian communist daily *il manifesto*. Her interview, translated by David Broder and published in English here for the first time, reflects the international left's hope in the Chilean experiment, but also the realization of how fragile it was in the face of army opposition. As a grimly foreboding subtitle in *il manifesto* read at the time: "If the officers win, it won't be a changing of the palace guard, but a bloodbath."

Except for certain flourishes at the election rallies, the way they talk politics in Santiago is nothing like the clichéd view of Latin America. There's not much rhetoric, epithets are used sparingly, and there's a notable tendency not to make exaggerated promises. Chile seems to be waiting, cautious like a cat, but certainly not a sleeping one. You can ask anyone — an intellectual, a worker, a taxi driver, or a shopgirl — why everyone is "politicized," and no one can give you any sure answer. But that's not because, as some love to claim, Chileans are naturally "institutionally minded" and thus placid. Rather, it's that they know the situation's unstable — and they aren't hiding it. The most categorical response I got was from the greatest Chilean of all, Salvador Allende Gossens. He, like all his compatriots, measures his words, but he speaks with growing assuredness. For he has to play his cards with conviction — and in a hurry. I spoke at length with Allende over breakfast at the presidential palace. I had been invited there together with Paul Sweezy and Michel Gutelman, whom the two Santiago universities had invited to take part in a seminar on "transitional societies." Our presence irritated the Chilean Communists, who deserted the seminar and attacked us extraordinarily crudely in their unofficial paper ... they called us "ignorant gringos" and "pro-Beijing" renegades. So, when the president invited us — notwithstanding his solid links with the Communist Party — it taught them quite a lesson. He knew that none of us had played down our doubts or misrepresented our positions just because of the invitation. A few minutes after we had sat down, he asked me "Is there anything in this country that you do find convincing, comrade?"

"What you're trying to do here is important, Mr President" (and he interrupts me right away — "Not 'Mr President,' call me 'comrade.' I am a comrade just like you"). "But I think there's a long road from here to socialism." It's not an answer which particularly pleases him, but he admits, "Yes, it's a difficult road." But he isn't interested in dwelling on this: for him, what matters is that

we understand how things move, what he wants to do, and most of all the difficulties he faces. And he has no intention of veiling them with optimism. As soon as he entered the room where we were waiting for him, Allende — a short man, chubbier than he appears in photos, but also more radiant — was clearly tired. But he directly approached us, with a sure manner: “Thanks for coming. You’re opinion-formers in your own countries so it’s very important that you get to know today’s Chile and explain it to others.” And after a little self-indulgence (“I’m a doctor, I’m not a politician by choice”) we get straight to the point. And talk about Chile’s present difficulties.

Difficulties at the international level? “We have those, too,” he replies. “We have 4,000 km of borders, no one could defend them. We are alone here at the bottom of the continent. And we’re troubling a lot of people.” The obvious unmentioned reference here, like everywhere in Latin America, is to Brazil; powerful, violent and expansionist, it directed the coup d’état in Bolivia and thus removed a possible ally of Allende’s. “I don’t think there’ll be a military attack. But it’s essential that we’re not isolated. It was the Argentinian president Alejandro Agustín Lanusse who opened the door to the countries of the Andean Pact. Of course ...” — and here he glances at me, for he knows what the Argentinian exiles in Chile think of this — “... he, too, had an interest in this operation. But for the moment we’re the ones who’ve benefited most”.

And he’s right: in reaching a compromise with Lanusse, he has strengthened his position with regard to the United States and taken away a possible hinterland for the Chilean right. It made no secret that it was counting on military hierarchs in this immense neighboring state, lying back-to-back with Chile along the spine of the Andes. “Now we can say that we are secure in the Southern Cone, even if the coup d’état in Bolivia was a grave turn.” A grave turn, but one that may end up even playing in Allende’s favor: when Bolivia’s Colonel Hugo Banzer imprudently dusted off the old demand for a sea outlet at Chile’s expense, this at a stroke restored the unity of Chile’s army — still the most uncertain point in Allende’s plans — around the president.

## **A Real Threat**

But what about the Americans? How does Allende evaluate US secretary of state Bill P. Rogers’s statements after the Chilean government refused to compensate the owners of the mines that were nationalized? Was Rogers just spiteful, or was this a real threat?

“A real threat,” Allende insists. “Much more serious than anyone seems to have realized, here or anywhere else.” And he repeats the argument he had already made in a blunt response to the State Department. As he puts it, the United

States will not accept a state taking back the wealth plundered from it (even more so given that the Chilean case is a dangerous precedent), and so in response the United States blackmails all Latin America.

But unlike what *Newsweek* (and, barely more hypocritically, the big Santiago paper *El Mercurio* — an enemy of Allende's) said, the Popular Unity government not only doesn't seek a rupture, but it is moving extremely cautiously. Essentially, it is targeting only those issues — like the mines — where it undeniably has justice on its side.

The operation to calculate the compensation owed to Anaconda and Kennecott [mining firms, whose holdings were nationalized by Allende], ought to have ended with a clamorous “Not only do we owe you nothing, but it is you who still owe us around \$400 million.” Yet it was conducted without hubbub, with minimal recourse to sloganeering, and with maximum oversight by international experts.

For Allende, “The United States can do a lot to harm us. All the replacement parts needed for the copper industry come from the United States. And so, too, the chemical agents we need. They could shut off production from one day to the next.” And will that happen? “Let's hope not. But this is why we need international support.”

What, I ask, are the most serious short-term difficulties? Here, too, Allende is direct: “Foreign currencies and ensuring supplies.” Chile has always needed to import food and other consumer goods: and with a real wage increase calculated at around 40 percent, there has been a resulting rise in demand for these latter. And they have to come from abroad: almost \$300 million this year, and more the next year. Then Chile has to pay \$360 million a year to cover its foreign debt, which has soared since the mines were nationalized. And it's no mystery that the currency reserves are running low, now no more than \$100 million. “Do you really have to pay?” Allende looks at me askance: “Chile will pay its due.” We're talking about the big global banks — and making enemies of them would mean trouble.

“We need credit,” Allende explains — and he makes no pretense that he's already found it. “Everything remains to be decided, we've raised the problem with the socialist countries and we're negotiating, but it's all still being discussed — nothing has been sealed.” There's Europe, too, but it's far away and as I'd later find out, FIAT — which seemed interested in easing relations in order to set up a major plant in Chile — was suddenly covered by a thousand Italian government guarantees. There's Germany. There's Japan, with all those millions of dollars raked in this summer: it has to invest them somewhere. And indeed, Chile has spoken with Japan. But clearly thus far, faced with American

irritation — and perhaps uncertainty on Allende's domestic fate — no one has gambled on issuing major credit to Chile. Its industrial reconversion will take more than a few days, and for a while the agrarian reform will cost more than it takes in. And Soviet caution is manifest.

Allende doesn't hide the fact that this is his main problem: he's sure that if he can resolve this one then he can sort everything else out, on his left and his right. To his right, he's now at loggerheads with the Christian Democrats — “They've all banded together in opposition to everything.” “But [progressive Christian Democrat] Radomiro Tomic behaved differently at first, no?” — “Yes, but today they're all on the other side.” He says this with anger, bitterness, but also a half-smile, hinting at the limits of the right-wing opposition. “But the army has been neutralized for now.”

The Chilean army — he tells me, like everyone here does — is not the traditional instrument of coups d'état: it is the expression of a middle-class layer with strong institutional ties. Yet unlike others, the comrade president doesn't seem to harbor too many illusions: he is careful in the adjectives he uses, and for now settles for its “neutrality.” To this end, he needs a foreign-purchases policy that does not alienate the middle classes by restricting consumption or provide a mass base for agitations on the right, which has many more branches than [defeated 1970 presidential candidate] Jorge Alessandri's party alone. All the more so given that a confrontation is looming over the famous bill to determine the areas of state intervention. Allende hurried to nationalize industries before most capital could flee. But it is obvious that under the current hailstorm, only protected small/medium firms are investing, and the Christian Democrats are seeking to limit how far government expropriations can go — in this, aided by Popular Unity's lack of a majority in Congress. Allende has thus proposed to list the areas of possible state intervention, the areas of mixed intervention and those left up to the private sector. Allende tells me about the mechanism for this, insisting that if no agreement is made but the bill passes, he will veto it by presidential decree and instead hold a referendum. The aim: to reduce his adversaries' margin of mass support. And his adversaries know this. The game is playing out in a short time frame and it's obvious that Allende is worried. As he speaks to me in a low voice and short sentences (our table is too big not to break up into a series of dialogues between neighbors) Allende eats very little and does not seem inclined to put anything in overly diplomatic terms. “How have you found people's mood?” he asks me. I reply that the country appears as if without tension: the greatest passions are to be found among the young conscripts called up by the government and then in the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). You don't see the participation of the

crowd, from below.

“We can mobilize the masses when we want,” he explains. “But isn’t it important that they mobilize by themselves? If there’s a difficult situation, wouldn’t it be better if the masses had their own tools to intervene?” Here Allende doesn’t play along, though a moment later a smile appears in his eyes and he interjects “so the comrade is an ultraleftist!” He adds, “It’s for the parties to mobilize and organize the masses. There are parties and unions. What did you think of the Socialist Party?” I found it interesting as a sponge absorbing different forces, less closed than the Communist Party and more able to reflect the contrasting pressures of a political base facing a new situation. Allende — quite rightly — considers it little-organized. He tells me he has no time to occupy himself with this, though he does participate in a party meeting every Wednesday and Friday.

But it’s clear that something else worries him, precisely because it exceeds his own political horizon. And this is the first emergence of a mass, or class presence — the one called into being by the MIR with the land occupations, which do not obey the rules of the political-institutional game. These masses (and the MIR), which sometimes break out of any arranged rhythm, also need to be “neutralized” or at least “channeled” — though Allende doesn’t say this openly. Not by accident, he assures me his relations with the MIR are excellent, at the personal level: his sister Laura, a doctor, he explains, has a son who is a MIR cadre and always has him and his comrades round her house. In Chile, these links count.

A little after, once breakfast is over, I’m embarrassed to have monopolized the president — and I try to let the others have their go. But the tone soon changes. The discussion has turned to the trial that Allende has begun against a nephew of his in the MIR who has gone rather further in criticizing the army, in the pages of that party’s newspaper, *Rebelde*. “You should understand, the fact he’s my nephew doesn’t change anything!” The president adopts a sharper tone: “You mustn’t play with fire. I will not allow irresponsible provocations. If anyone believes that in Chile an army coup d’état would play out like in other Latin-American countries with a simple changing of the guard here at La Moneda [the presidential palace in Santiago] they’re badly mistaken. Here, if the army breaks out of legality it means civil war. It’s what happened in Indonesia. Do you believe the workers would let industry be taken off them? Or the peasants, the land? There will be a hundred thousand dead, a bloodbath. I won’t allow anyone to play around with this.”

He truly believes this. But once again, as with the relationship with the masses, the only guarantee he sees is in the time that he himself is setting for the

operation, his style of “law-abiding offensive” combined with a rare ability to break up the enemy front. Each more direct, more straightforward class offensive risks tipping the balance into the negative. I doubt that his nephew will go to jail: but rapping the knuckles of the MIR is now *de rigueur*, as is calling the workers to order, when necessary.

As we prepare to break up, around 2:30 PM, Allende tells us that he is heading to the North, to the vast copper mine of Chuquicamata, where workers have demanded a huge pay raise — an increase of between 50 and 70 percent. “They can’t do it, and I’m going there to tell them that. Who are they at war against? They are now the masters of the mine.” “It’s not they who are the masters, comrade president, but the state.” Dr Allende glares at me like a recalcitrant patient: “the people is the master.” “Well, comrade president ...” — “It is. It will be!” A moment later, after we’ve said goodbye, he calls me back. “I know that tomorrow you’re going to Concepción, I’m glad, it’s important that you go there, I want to talk about it after, with calm.” The fact is, the invitation to Concepción comes from the “pro-MIR” university, and it is there that the MIR has organized land occupations. Allende, who has already astonished me by showing that he knows what *il manifesto* is, believes in the virtue of debate, wants to convince, to defend “his” Chile, his line, to win everyone over — “ultraleftists” included.

But there won’t be an “after” and I will not see Dr Allende again. There’s only a day between the return from Concepción and my departure, and the evening before that a huge scandal breaks out. On the occasion of the Latin-American Agricultural Trade Show, held in the presence of ministers and ambassadors, the agrarian right incautiously decides to denounce the government’s “statism,” accusing it of undermining the values of property and peasant initiative.

Allende, who had been supposed to attend the Trade Show, only sees the speech by Benjamin Matte — who perhaps thought he was covered because he is president for the institute for relations with Cuba — an hour before he was meant to speak. Infuriated, not only does the president back out of opening the Trade Fair, but he calls on Matte to precede his speech by reading a letter by Allende himself, calling Matte irresponsible in no uncertain terms. The Trade Show opens in an extraordinary atmosphere, with people frenetically applauding Allende’s letter and Matte trying to make himself heard above whistling and shouts of “*momio, maricón!*” (“dead old man, faggot!”), as ambassadors and ministers walk out, and friendly countries close their pavilions early. The next day there is sensation in the papers, a cabinet meeting and a violent row with the Christian Democrats. It’s impossible to see the president — and we can understand why.

But this episode, too, makes up part of the portrait: indeed, personality is perhaps the terrain he's strongest on, unbeatable even. The reason why friends and enemies on left and right respect him. They talk about him — "El Chicho" — with a mix of affection and spite. They list his failings, but with some sense of reserve. You can take radically different positions, like MIR does, but no one denies that Allende's is the determination of a politician of great stature: an old socialist who — contrary to the custom of socialists and presidents in Latin America and elsewhere — isn't in search of compromises. Dr Allende made three attempts to get into government in order to realize his experiment: and now he won't barter over it with anyone. What remains to be seen is the internal stability of his project: if it's destined to endure, or if it will tip either toward defeat or the revolution that Allende believes he's already achieved.

## **Postscript, September 18, 1973: "Don't Call Santiago"**

One week to the day after General Pinochet and his junta seized power in a bloody coup d'état, resulting in Allende's death, *il manifesto* carried a report of a phone call with a comrade in the Chilean capital, Santiago.

Last night we finally managed to make contact with Santiago. We rang the number of a house of comrades, and after many fruitless attempts we finally found someone to pick up. It was a dramatic call. On the other end of the line was the wife of a comrade, her voice choked with tears. We found ourselves unable to put our questions into words, out of our anxiety as well as the fear of compromising the person who answered. Here was our brief conversation, disrupted by interference and suddenly broken off after a few minutes.

*il manifesto*: Tell us how you are doing.

Santiago: There's just one word: Jakarta, Jakarta.

*il manifesto*: Is the fighting still going on?

Santiago: The junta is crushing everything. But Santiago is cut off. We don't know what's happening in the rest of the country.

*il manifesto*: Are there a lot of dead?

Santiago: It's just a massacre, a massacre. Now it is almost simply a massacre. Thousands of communists, comrades, workers have been killed.

*il manifesto*: Can you tell us who?

Santiago: Hundreds of our personal friends have been killed.

*il manifesto*: What is the junta planning? Has it declared its political line?

Santiago: All four in the junta are fascists. They are fascists. Has this been understood in Europe, in Italy? Has everyone condemned it?

*il manifesto*: Yes, there's a general condemnation of the junta, it is isolated. There are strikes and demonstrations. The whole press is denouncing the massacre.

Santiago: The borders won't be opened up again for now, you see. It's impossible. Do something ...

At this point, the connection broke off. The phone call was made taking special precautions. We invite comrades not to call Santiago.