

Chile's Changing Political Landscape: A Conversation with Chilean Congressman Giorgio Jackson

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15-18 minutos

Good evening to everyone.

On October 9th, President Piñera said in *"In the middle of this convulsed Latin America, we see Chile as a real oasis, with a stable democracy."*

Nine days later, on October 18th, he was declaring a state of emergency and sending military troops to the streets.

What happened? Probably this question it's going to be studied in the next few years by a lot of social scientists in our country, region and maybe in the world.

Well, as the invitation to this event says, what is clear is that the political landscape in Chile changed and I want to share with you a couple of thoughts on why this happened, and what is at stake in the next months and years.

As you introduced me, I'm a former student spokesman and I'm also in my second period in Congress, we founded our party, Democratic Revolution and we formed a coalition called "Frente Amplio" (Broad Front), and we disputed the last presidential election, represented by Beatriz Sanchez, who got 20% of the votes. So, I'm talking from a left wing point of view, which I hope doesn't blind me.

As you may have heard or read, the protest in Chile began with a rise on the subway ticket. The rise was about 30 pesos (less than 5 US cents), a really marginal expense, but as you say, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. In the initial protests you could hear, "it was not the 30 pesos, it was 30 years". ¿How to understand that in the middle of the "Oasis"?

I'm going to use 3 minutes and try to summarize the last 30 years.

To begin, 30 years ago, Patricio Aylwin assumed as president after 17 years of Pinochet dictatorship. The process for taking down Pinochet through a plebiscite -with slogan was "happiness is coming"- involved a lot of political negotiations known as "the transition pact" and involved mainly some changes to the constitution imposed by Pinochet in 1981, in order to maintain the basics on the economical model.

That economical model was an experiment led by the "Chicago Boys", who were mentored in the 70's by the economics Professor Milton Friedman at the Chicago University. Basically they privatized the social security (pensions and health), weakened the public education, creating incentives to the for profit private sector took part of the educational system and they also atomized the labour relationships in order to diminish the power of the labour unions. They also privatized the majority of the public companies and built a new taxation model.

All of this didn't express its potential until we came back to democracy and the country started to attract private investments, signing free trade agreements and starting to see sustained growth. We had in the 90's and 2000's a very important achievement on reducing poverty, the prices on copper and other natural resources were very favorable, and average income started to be near the US 20.000 a year. In 2010 we officially entered the OECD.

Few years before that, the high school student movement began to appear with demands related to the inequality in the educational system, and pointed to the heritage of the dictatorship, the organic constitutional law of education. The response of the political power in that time was a series of technocratic reforms that creates more indicators, accountability and transparency, but the model was under no threat. On 2011 we went into the streets to demand changes in the higher education system: we started demanding the inequality on the access, the excessive student debt, and the fraud of many for profit universities. But in the process of protest, we realize that the problem for education, was also in the distribution of wealth and in the distribution of power. That's why we also demanded a tax reform and a new constitution.

Since 2010 till now, we had a large number of protests demanding different issues, regarding to environmental problems, indigenous peoples demands, LGBTQ rights, the failure of our pension

system, the segregation and lack of social housing, the feminist movement, etc. All of these movements helped to create a diagnosis of different kinds of Chiles.

The average income is about 25k, but our minimum wage is less than US\$400 a month (less than \$5.000 a year), and the median income is less than US700 (US8.5k a year).

The 1% of the population gets 30% of the national income. The 0,1% gets 18% and the 0,01% gets the 10%.

The levels of debt in the Chilean houses are increasing dramatically, which makes every time more of the income to pay debts. We are not talking about investments debts. We are talking about food and dress debts.

Renting an apartment in Santiago has increased 5 times more than the wages in the last 15 years.

In the end, meritocracy in Chile seems to be just an illusion that thrives the economy, but only fulfills the dreams of the few.

So, despite the different reforms that have taken place in Chile in the last 10 years, including the educational reform, the tax reform, and the political reforms, all of them function in the same subsidiary paradigm that have driven us to this situation. At the end, the role of the state cannot be under discussion. Just in the margins.

The problem underneath, is that we cannot deliberate democratically, because the current constitution doesn't allow it. Several times we have common sense proposals banned, like unions having the power to negotiate collectively or consumers being protected through sanctions by the national consumers service were banned by the Constitutional Court. That also creates a kind of self censorship by the governments. A kind of submission to the established power, a submission to the past, that imposed for us an invariable vision. Jaime Guzmán, the brain behind the Pinochet's Constitution, put it this way: *"That is to say, if the adversaries manage to govern, they will be constrained to follow an action not so different from what one would yearn for, because the margin of alternative that the court actually imposes on those who play in it, is sufficiently reduced to make the opposite extremely difficult"*.

After the 18 October, it seems to disappear the veil that predisposed the Chileans into submission. The most massive demonstrations in decades took place in the main squares of the cities, mobilizing millions of people. The political response of the government was initially just violence, as if this was one problem of order and public security. Until now we have official reports from different autonomous organisations that confirm the massive and reiterative violation of human rights in Chile. We are talking about Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the initial report of the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights. Just to give some numbers, according to the National Institute for Human Rights, there have been more than 2.114 wounded persons because of different kinds of fire shots. More than 427 people with eye wounds (many of them lost their sight). 1.541 out of 9.545 people detained by the police denounced sexual violence, torture or disproportional use of power. More than 280 boys, girls and teenagers were injured in protests. Sadly, 31 people have died in the context of a protest in the last 4 months.

And despite all the violence in the streets, people continuously support the demands and reject the actions of the government. According to several polls, less than 10% of the Chilean population support president Piñera, and the great majority of the population support the protests. Many of them said that the violence is the only way to be listened, which is something completely out of the radar in Chilean politics. That reflects, somehow, that the current institutions have not been capable of processing the social conflicts and give a peaceful way to correct them.

That's why the demand for a new constitution took place so strongly. That's why we also concurred, in November the 15th, to a political agreement in order to ask the people, through a referendum, if they want a new constitution or not, and how should be composed the assembly that would write the proposal, if 100% elected or 50% elected and 50% designed by congress.

This possibility has not been understood by the population as the ONE matter that would end the protests, because it is a long process, at least 2 years from now. Some changes are needed now, and

my opinion is that the government has failed to criminalize the protest instead of recognizing in them opposition to their ideas.

The government argued that they were elected in a ballotage by 55% of the population, but they don't realize that only half of the country voted, and that, after the 18 October, it seems to disappear this veil of submission.

So, ¿What is at stake in this process? The opportunity to discuss a new model for Chile, based on different rules than the homo economicus, and without the constitutional handcuffs that we inherit. Of course that this would put uncertainties on the 0,1% of our country, the current stakeholders of our resources and assets.

As the political scientist Juan Pablo Luna said in an interview a few weeks ago “the elite is living the uncertainty that most of the Chileans have to face in their everyday life”. And it seems obvious that this cannot be eradicated by one government announcement, but it's going to be part of a process. Far from that, the government seems to put efforts in the other way.

You can read in some streets in Santiago that: In Chile, neoliberalism was borned; in Chile neoliberalism will also die.

That also leaves the question that I would like to address in the further conversation: Is this part of a global awakening against the concentration of power and money and the destruction of our environment? I think so, but you never know which one is going to be the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Thanks.