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**Protests In Chile Unearth Stark Disparity Within Chilean Society**

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The protests in Chile have been fluctuating in intensity since they started in October 2019. While the protests were started because of a small hike in the price of public transportation, it is underpinned by a burgeoning dissatisfaction “against the poor quality of public health care and education; against low wages and the rising cost of living; against the meager pensions that Chileans receive in old age,” which have led to this wave of anti-government demonstration.

Chile has been touted as a stable, developed country which has enjoyed great prosperity in terms of capital revenue as the country with the highest per capita income rate in Latin America. In addition to this, Chile also belongs to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a 36 member club of mostly rich nations. However, wealth disparity remains high as Quartz reporter Annalisa Merelli has found that the GINI Coefficient of Chile sits at around 46.6 and has an income gap which is 65% higher than the OECD average. The main reason for the protests is that there seems to be a large amount of revenue flowing into Chile, yet the vast majority of Chileans do not reap the rewards of their country’s economic prosperity. There is great anger towards the billionaire President Sebastián Piñera, as many Chileans believe he does not understand the needs of the people. Currently, his approval ratings have dropped to the single figure number of 6%, the lowest recorded rating. There have also been a large number of protesters demonstrating against gender inequality in Chilean politics and how the patriarchal system in Chile filters down the issues of sexual assault and gender violence unto society.

However, not all protests have been peaceful, as violence has once again flared up in Chile as

the protests intensify. This has been met by a quite repressive use of force by the Chilean National Police Force. There has now been a total of 27 deaths with over 2,500 people injured during bouts of violent encounters and vandalism. The National Institute of Human Rights in Chile has found that a total of 10,000 people have been detained. Shockingly, around 1,100 children were held by the Chilean Police forces.

National Human Rights Institute (INDH) director Sergio Micco has stated that these acts of repression have been “the most serious and have seen the most human rights violations committed since 1989,” when brutal Dictator Augusto Pinochet was in power. This is unprecedented and has led to widespread shock among the international community due to the fact that this is occurring in a democracy which is meant to uphold the rights of its people. As Mr. Micco exclaimed “This occurred in democracy, in our democracy. How was this possible?”

Al Jazeera has reported that “the institute has filed hundreds of legal actions against authorities for homicide, torture, sexual violence and other abuses.” The UN and several other international organisations have condemned these abuses against human rights and have called for these actions to be immediately halted. Recently, President Piñera announced that a constitutional referendum would take place in April in the hope that this would quell the protests. This has not happened, even though reform to the outdated constitution, which was made during the rule of Pinochet, has been one of the main demands by protesters. Even if the constitution is to be reformed, it will likely take an additional 18 months for the new constitution to be drafted and released. Chileans want immediate change and many believe that this referendum will not satisfy this need. “Students are planning larger demonstrations for March, and those in the streets say they don’t expect the new constitution to address their concerns which range from higher pensions and free education to the removal of the center-right president and the end of capitalism,” as reported by the Washington Post.

On Wednesday the 29th of January President Piñera told an audience of business leaders. “We don’t know how what started on October 18 will end. There are two paths: One is violence, and the other is to attentively compile all of the voices and respond respecting the rule of law without sacrificing our ability to grow.” The Chilean President is correct about the fact that there are two paths, however, it seems that his government is straddling the fine line between cooperation and violence. The National Police Force is acting under the jurisdiction of his government, and so far President Piñera has yet to satisfy the demands of the protesters. Additionally, economic growth projections for 2020 have been cut from 2.3 percent to 1 to 1.5 percent because of the “violence, looting and destruction that have halted the economy.”

There will be an uphill battle for President Piñera to gain greater approval as he is unrelatable to the majority of Chileans and must start listening intently to the demands of the protesters. Gender parity in the constitutional assembly must be instated by President Piñera as gender equality is one of the major demands by Chile’s feminist movement. There must also be a greater array of policies developed and implemented to combat the income inequality of Chile. Most importantly there should be a denouncement of the violence used by the Chilean National Police Force and all those detained under unjust pretences should be released.

For now it will be a wait and see approach for all involved in the situation of Chile. Protesters, for the most part, do not want an increase in violence and are still hopeful for the April referendum. However, they will wait and watch the movements of their President to see whether he will listen to their demands. President Piñera should be aware of his dwindling support and understand that he must listen to the demands given to him if he has any hope of holding onto power.

