

Marcela Rios Tobar

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SPEAKERS

Sanjay Ruparelia, Marcela Rios Tobar

Sanjay Ruparelia 00:03

This is on the frontlines of democracy, a podcast about the challenges facing democracies around the world. My name is Sanjay Ruparelia. Each month, I sit down with scholars, writers and journalists to see how we can protect democracy in an evolving post Western order. Today I'm joined by Marcelo Rios Tobar, a visiting scholar at the Latin American Center at the University of Oxford, and the former Minister of Justice and Human Rights in Chile. Our discussion coincided with the 50th anniversary of the coup, which took place in 1973. In this episode, we talked about the outside forces that made it so difficult to establish socialism and Chile through parliamentary democracy.

Marcela Rios Tobar 00:43

Part of the economic problems have to do with explicit policy by the Nixon administration. Nixon has this famous phrase to Kissinger saying, you know, we'll make the Chilean economy scream. And they did that in many ways.

Sanjay Ruparelia 00:59

We'll explore the challenges of progressive democratic reform when Chilean institutions are still haunted by a violent history.

Marcela Rios Tobar 01:06

Chile is one of the very few examples in the world where you have a transition from authoritarian to democratic government that that keeps an authoritarian constitution drafted by the military and the non democratic context. So it's an anomaly to continue having this conservative, you know, neoliberal inspired constitution that is very restricted on the role of the state and social provisionals.

Sanjay Ruparelia 01:31

Can Chileans overcome polarized memories of the past to forge a more egalitarian future?

Marcela Rios Tobar 01:36

I think you cannot understand this polarization without understanding that 44% of Chileans voted to maintain Pinochet in power for another eight years in 1988. And the percentage of Chileans who have supported the right has never been less than 30%.

Sanjay Ruparelia 01:55

Marcella, thanks so much for joining us.

Marcela Rios Tobar 01:56

Thank you for the invitation.

Sanjay Ruparelia 02:01

In September 1970, Chileans elected a Democratic socialist as the president, Salvador Allende. His administration became the first in world history to legislate socialism through nonviolent democratic means. It nationalized mines, industries, and banks; redistributed land, introduced various reforms in health and education. Why did Allende think that these reforms were necessary?

Marcela Rios Tobar 02:25

Well, when Allende took office in 1970, it had that was his fourth attempt at running for president. He had been a candidate in the elections in 1950, to 1958, in 1963, and in 1970, when he finally won. Chile was a very unequal society, it was, in a way, an exception in Latin America in it with respect to democracy, because they had had a long standing electoral democracy that functioned really rather well in the exchange of elites in power, but it had profound socio economic inequalities, it was a very restricted democracy, the majority of population did not participate only 16 or 20%, of the, of the population or adult population were voting in the early 60s. So again, the and the Popular Unity coalition was a coalition of left wing parties are fundamentally a coalition between the two major groups, which were the communists and the socialists. And they also this was also anomaly an anomaly in the sense that you did not have such strong left wing parties involved in electoral politics and Latin America, the majority of countries had left wing groups, but they were kind of outside institutional politics. So essentially, they had the socialists and the communists, very similar to what was going on was happening in France and Italy. At the same time, we're part of electoral politics, participated consistently won seats in Congress and slowly increase the percentage of support in election. So they wanted to construct an alternative, up to social essence from you know, the Soviet more inclined, socialist idea of state socialism, but also a different route from the Cuban revolution that had been been so influential in Latin America that thought that the only way to get to power in Latin America was through armed struggle. So here it was this more closely connected project to social, later social democracy, but with a Marxist, rather rhetoric that was very, I think, threatening to most political actors within the country and abroad.

Sanjay Ruparelia 04:54

So as you were just saying that there's a very unequal country and many of the supporters of the government that The time I've read say that, you know, give dignity to the people, the Pueblo. But the period also saw great upheavals, from what I've read hyperinflation, critical food shortages. Some argue that this was due to the actions of opponents on the right, supported by many in the middle class, who organized strikes and blockades but others blamed the more radical wing of the Alliance,

especially those outside the coalition of the socialists and communists, as you've mentioned, in particular, the movement of the revolutionary left, which began to take some matters into its own hands. Looking back, how do you understand what happened in these three years?

Marcela Rios Tobar 05:36

Well, I think both in Chilean in the intellectual and political world, we will be discussing this questions for many decades to come, I don't think we will have a profound consensus on the major factors. But I do think we have more increasingly more evidence to show that there was an important and significant component of external intervention. As you may know, the National Security archives in the US have been increasingly declassified documents to show the involvement of the US part of the economic problems have to do with explicit policy by the next administration. Nixon has this famous phrase to kissing, you're saying, you know, we'll make the Chilean economy scream. And they did that in many ways, you know, the stop international cooperation, loans funding, major US corporations were very important in shelleyan. Economy, the international telecommunications company, for instance, had a major role pushing the Nixon administration to do more to prevent the socialist president from winning, but also because of the nationalization of copper, a lot of very important us enterprises were directly affected by the government. So there was a significant intervention that not only not only stronger, or sanction the economy, but also actively supporting the opposition in a variety, variety of ways. You know, the media, the opposition media, evolution, political parties, funding strikes by key actors in the academic sector, for instance, truck drivers were, you know, had a long standing polarization that really impacted the economy. But having said all that, it is also true. And I think depending on who is recording the history, there was also a lot of problems within the government coalition that acts exasperated aggravated this structural situation of boycott by external and internal actors, because, you know, the right wing and business community and agricultural landowners were all threatened by the popular unidays program, and actually actively participated in trying to, you know, not just oppose but, you know, bring the government to chaos. But also, as I was saying, the government was haphazard in making decisions, it was, it was pulled in different directions, there was a left a far left wing sector within the government coalition and outside the government coalition that kept promoting a political solution that would go beyond institutional constraints, as they saw it, you know, preceding the many obstacles and hurdles that the government had, there was a far left wing sector that wanted the president to close Congress to you know, expropriate all private industry to, you know, give all the industries to the workers for that self administration. And many of those actions started happening even without the approval of the government, because workers organizations and rural workers organizations started making decisions on their own on what economic sector should be administered by by workers. So this lack of consistency and divisions within the government coalition, because there was another sector within the government coalition that wanted to stay within the institutional framework and be more moderate in terms of reforms, you know, provide more order to that way that the economic reforms were being done. So both factors, the internal divisions, the pulling from different sectors, this drive from bottom up to worse, you know, strengthening the the socialist route also played a major role in generating the sensation to middle classes and to upper classes the country was in a state of chaos disorderly and that at sometimes it seemed that seemed that the government was not necessarily in charge of the process.

Sanjay Ruparelia 10:01

I mean, as you were speaking on made me think of, you know, the left and India between the socialist and a communist and also its own divisions and extra parliamentary forces as well. So you, you know, began by saying a little bit earlier that Chile has had this long history of power peacefully changing hands between elected leaders. But of course, as we know, it's the 50th anniversary this week in September 1973. ind was deposed and by the military and a brutal coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Many Chileans reportedly welcomed the coup, but felt it would be short lived, paving the way to another election. And initially, the military claimed that it would rule only as long as circumstances demanded. But Pinochet rule for 17 years, at least 3000 civilians were murdered 10s of 1000s were tortured and notorious detention centers, many simply disappeared in a regime governed by state terror, what explains the brutality of the crackdown, when many expected it to be short lived?

Marcela Rios Tobar 10:57

I think we're just beginning to understand the reasons behind this brutality today, in the sense that I think that the, the, the entire grasp of the massacre was produced, on the one hand, a few intellectuals close to the regime realized very early on that the crackdown in the initial day, they had been so violent, that unless an entire transformation of of society and politics was was promoted, there will be no way of stopping, you know, a new win by the left. So I think that that was some on on the one side part of an understanding of some people that were connected to the military. And I think also the role of the US and the national security, security theory and the training of the military for in those decades. And and I think also the very kind of deep polarized international context of the Cold War and the real threat that the US and sectors of the military felt by the Yemeni Government and the rise of communism, you know, that there was a perceived and real, you know, a real threat that Chile will become Cuba, that was just not just a sort of a slogan, which was worked, which is still quite used, that it was going to become a Marxist model. But it was in the context of the Cold War, where, you know, the US was in the midst of fighting for supremacy or over the western hemisphere, they had promoted a policy, where they needed to show an exemplify exemplary example of what would happen if you wanted to construct a Marxist regime through the democratic means. And we have to remember that in 1973, there was also a military coup in ER y, and later also in Brazil, and Argentina, which had different political processes. But the strategies and the the persecution of opposite opponents was very similar. There was a lot of collaboration between the military of these countries there, there was a couple of common policies. So the reason for the repression had to do with internal and external and external factors. Also, I think that the severity of the repression, you know, I would say, also had to do with internal military issues in the sense that there was, you know, again, they always believed that the military will be constitutionally abiding, that the armed forces in Chile were different from their forces in other countries, he always thought that there will be a sector of the armed forces that would oppose the coup, and in the imaginary of the left and the government, and particularly of the President Allende, there will be a civil war because part of the armed forces would fight to defend the constitutionally elected government. As we know, that never happened. But there was a sector as very small marginal sector of the armed forces a word constitutional, and we're not in favor of the coup. And what happened was that the military had to exterminate, you know, an important part of their own ranks. They assassinated some of them within Chile, they, you know, the majority of generals who took part on the coup on September 11, ended up being either killed in strange circumstances executed for not following orders or being, you know, assassinated abroad, like the Commander in Chief, general practice in when Osiris so because of the internal, you know, repression of their own works because of the severity of the

repression that they thought necessary to teach a lesson to the left, not just in to but also because of the very important and persistent role of the US supporting, you know, a profound repression. And we also know that Kissinger and Nixon were also very in favor of really heavy handed repression. So all those factors ended up being fundamental in explaining why there was such a drastic and profound repression. And ultimately, what ended up being the route taken by Pinochet was of profound transformation. I think this is something that is often said in Chile. But it's true that the only revolutionary successful project in Chilean history was the dictatorship revolutionary in the sense of transformation in the sense of transforming society, but also because of the brutality of its the way that impulse impulse power. And

Sanjay Ruparelia 15:55

that was actually brings into the next question, I was going to ask you that not only is there a brutal crackdown, but Chile becomes a laboratory for neoliberal economic policies over the next two decades, the liberalization of terrorists deregulation, the economy, privatization of many state enterprises, how did these policies change Chile's economy and society over the 17 year period?

Marcela Rios Tobar 16:18

Well, this is also a fascinating, you know, topic of academic debate and political discussion, in the sense that at the beginning, the military did not necessarily have an economic plan, you know, they were, of course, wanted to do away with the left and wanted to change politics. But soon after, you know, there was this group of civilian economists who had right wing Communists who had been studying at the University of Chicago who have been, you know, very famous, now that Chico boys group did have a plan of, you know, radical, you know, you know, following Hyack, the this of radical kind of Neo liberalism, in the sense of taking capitalism to a further step and diminishing the role of the state in, in almost every eighth possibility, which is, I think, such a radical economic transformation is very difficult to promote, under democratic conditions, because you will always have, you know, opposition's you would also have unions who oppose, for instance, changing the conditions of social policies of pensions, so, you know, educational system, what, but if you're in an in a dictatorship, such with such a heavy control of everything, without opposition, without, you know, political parties, without free media, without the possibility of protests or of organization, the, you know, the repression that we were discussing was not just targeted towards political leaders, you know, the majority of social leaders in Chile have unions of all sorts were also persecuted and killed. So you, you had a profound repression and, you know, a totalitarian in a sense, grasp on power and lack of dissent. So this vision of transforming the economy was sort of instrumental to the military, they were not necessarily new Liberal convinced themselves, but they thought this as an opportunity. So they embarked on this project, that meant a transformation of the role of the state in provided social services. It also align itself with drafting a new constitution and the new constitution that the military junta as a very small group of our eighth right wing scholars and and constitutional lawyers to draft had the the objective of transforming, you know, the very grounds in the way that the state was structure and function, the role of the state within the economy on social provision, the role the relationship between the state and politics of political parties of society, it was a mixture of neoliberal policies with corporatism in the sense of how society was perceived and structure. So you had components of corporatism in the sense of trying to supplant political parties, by intermediate organizations, you know, and the family and social organizations and trying to construct a model of society that would function without politics in a way you know, you would

have this idea so the project of transformation made a complete change in the pension system privatization of pension privatization of the health system at which was less profound than the transformation in the education system it's interesting to know that doctors continue to have a lot of power and change in society and they were I am they managed to resist even the dictatorship In a much sort of systematic way than teachers, and you know, so that the educational system was completely privatized and transformed while the health system continue to have managed to preserved a public sector that that has consistently survived and been enhance after the transition to democracy, but in any other, you know, all everything that had been nationalized, except copper was, you know, once again, return to private owner owners. It's interesting to know that even though the Popular Unity Government had an under the previous administration over the way the free fray had promoted an agricultural, an agrarian reform, frown, agrarian reform, and had paid land owners for the land, the military return the land to the learner is but the landowners never returned, you know, the money that they had received by the state for the land. So at this massive process of privatization created a really strong new business elite in Chile, a commercial elite, a financial elite that profited from buying at very cheap prices, banks, state companies, railways, you know, sanitary companies, Water Works competent, the, you know, the military sold everything. And what we found later, because at that moment, I think there was not so much information that a lot of corruption and traffic of influence went through this process as well, where even Pinochet and his family benefited tremendously from the sale of this companies and a small sector of the elites as well. Well, maybe in a small sector that was connected to the miniature family, but then the majority of high class of the high class in Chile, you know, landlord owners business community was really benefited by the dictatorship. And I don't think you can understand the support that Pinochet had in sectors of society with an understanding, also this process of, you know, social transformation that did have real concrete material and economic benefits for an important sector of society.

Sanjay Ruparelia 22:17

So you've described in great detail, this, this remarkable transformation of society, the economy, eight years after the 1980 constitution, as you mentioned, there's a plebiscite that takes place in Chile, which actually leads to a new democratic government in 1990, led by the Christian Democratic leader buttress your element, and then the next two decades saw a series of coalition governments, this time bringing the socialist together with the Christian Democrats call the concert ASEAN, and they kept this market oriented model that Pinochet had introduced, but they also try to improve social welfare over the main achievements and limitations of these reforms over the two decades then that followed when they were in power. Well,

Marcela Rios Tobar 22:56

you know, the consultancy on governments and you know, President Elwin Flay, Legos and Michelle Bachelet in both in two different periods, for governments in total have been perceived by many by as the most successful period of political multiparty coalition's not just in Latin America, but one of the cases in the world. And they were very successful in confronting some of the more severe impacts of this radical neoliberalism as particularly in terms of poverty. You know, when they, when the dictatorship finished, more than 40% of Chileans were under the line of poverty, and by now is less than 10% 7%. So extreme poverty, malnutrition, mortality rates, levels of schooling, you know, a whole array of really concrete indicators and human development indicators show that Chela went from a poor and equal

society to affluent society, middle class society, you know, middle high middle income country, but one of the things that they that they construct a single and governments did not manage to do, I would say, are three major things. One is that they were not successful in diminishing inequality, social inequality has remained extremely high, even though they, the country grew, the economy grew and poverty, the minute inequality remained because the rich sectors of society, the 1%, most rich percentage of society only became richer, you know, so the inequality has persisted until today. The second I think, issue that it's more political and symbolic, but it's been very important is that they were not able to change the constitution, you know, to do away until it's one of the very few examples in the world where you have a transition from authoritarian to democratic government that can that keeps out an authoritarian Constitution drafted by the military and the non democratic context. So it's an anomaly to continue having this conservative, you know, neoliberal inspired constitution that is very restricted on the role of the state and social provision. So the fact that the the, the consultation, governments were not able to change the constitution, it has political impacts in terms of how democracy works, in terms of participation in terms of symbolic terms, because it remains a very important authoritarian enclave that you are not able to change. But on the other hand, I am many, you know, that the Constitution was drafted in such a way as one of the ideologues of the Constitution, put it in the allowed governments to govern without really changing anything. So you could, you know, be stable and successful, one government after the other, but you couldn't change the development model with this constitution. And the construction governments did move, you know, the needle a bit in terms of social provision in terms of rights in every aspect that they could, but they couldn't change the pension, the privatization of pensions, the privatization of education, the privatization of health, they couldn't change the role of the state getting involved in the economy. So those things are the three main pillars that you could say, have continued to haunt, you know, Chilean democracy and till today.

Sanjay Ruparelia 26:30

And that provides a backdrop to these student protests that erupted in 2011 against the high cost of university fees amongst other issues, and then exploded on a much larger scale in 2019. A social revolt many observers have described, everything about Chile was questioned in 2019, as one protest slogan, put it that I read, it's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years, as you were saying its constitution remain intact. So this is what caused a popular uprising and government at the time, led by President Sebastian Pinera responded by agreeing to hold a plebiscite asking Chileans if they wanted a new constitution, and remarkably, over 80%, almost 80% said yes, leading to a new constituent assembly, a Constitutional Council and many of the delegates that were elected in May 21, I understand were on the left to represent it the left and in December of that year, one of its former student leaders of the left to Gabriel Boric, became the president. And this is the administration that you joined as the minister of justice and human rights. The new constitution that that Constitutional Council produced was hailed by many of the global left I mean, certainly in India, and other parts of the world, and Europe and North America codified many social rights to health care, education and water, it recognized the plural national character of Chilean society have granted more autonomy to indigenous peoples. And yet, even though there was such a remarkable level of support for a new constitution, that constitution was actually rejected by a large majority in this referendum a year ago and September 2022. So given everything you've described, why did it fail at that stage?

Marcela Rios Tobar 28:10

I think there's probably not a single reason why it failed. I think there's some mixture of issues. On the one hand, and maybe the most simplistic or narrower, narrower issues have to do with institutional design. And, you know, the whole design of the constitutional process, it was sort of an the elite response to the revolt, not necessarily, you know, the reward was for so many reasons, and by so many diverse group not really led by a political agenda, really sort of anomic in a sense, in the sense that you had people violently brought us in and other people peacefully brought us in, some people were protesting because of the pension, some people were practicing because of sexism, or the discrimination against indigenous people, other people were really practicing because of the 30 year kind of perception of not moving to transform the heritage of dictatorship. So it was a very wide sets of, of issues with Chile has a history of outburst of popular revolts. In Chile, it's not just unequal in social terms. It's a very litigious society. It's unequal culturally, and in terms of class. So this was, in a way a revolt of the underprivileged against the elites. And it was the political elites that design this institutional constitutional process. And, you know, one of the things that the people who were not necessarily keen on on changing the constitution worked into the sign was that the first plebiscite or the beginning was with voluntary voting, and of course 80% approve the constitution but I think that those people were the majority of really are Active involved politically involved people in society. And only 46% of the of the eligible voters concurred to that election, at the same design as stipulated that the plebiscite at the end should have mandatory boarding, which was not mandatory at the beginning. So it's complex to, to to compare the two processes because this was the first time that a mandatory voting was stated in Chile, since ever, because even the private the plebiscite in 1988, was the last time where almost 80% of the electorate voted. So you had in the 30 years in between an increasing perception of the population that had never voted before, you know, you had actual unpractical and disenfranchised ment of the popular sectors, particularly of young people. So they they went to vote without having ever voted before in a in an atmosphere where the opposition to the Constitution was really widespread among elites, you know, it wasn't so much sort of a left right wing divide, as much as I think a class divide in the sense that almost all elites were against the constitutional texts, even left wing parties in Congress, because the constitutional text call on for the elimination of the Senate, and, you know, a transformation of electoral rules, but also, you know, judges and the media and business people and owners of water rights and mining companies. And you know, there were so many evangelicals who were against women's reproductive rights, so there was so many groups against it, and not nobody with a clear power in favor, you know, there was just too many opposition points, the Constitution and the Constitutional Convention had antagonized just about everybody that had a corporate or an incumbent power in society. And I think the, you know, comparative constitutional experience show us that you cannot sort of approve a constitution unless you can comment, common political parties are against it, but certainly you cannot approve it. Once everybody, every incumbent is against it. So I think the institutional design, this antagonists antagonizing of all elite sectors and incumbents, and the third factor, which I think has probably less been less discussed, but I think it's it's an important issue that we need to explore further has to do with COVID. In the sense that, you know, the social revolt, and the constitutional process began before COVID had the country, then COVID came, and the entire electoral calendar had to be chained. And the country suffer the impacts of this global pandemic, in terms of the economy in terms of health, in terms of kids being home, people dying, it instilled a sense of insecurity. And then I think the appetite for transformation had vanished in a way when Chileans went to vote. Once again, I think that, you know, of course, in social sciences, we can never sort of try to understand what the counterfactual what what would have happened if the whole process would have taken place in the

initial calendar in an eight month period before the presidential election and before COVID. And having delayed the process for over a year and a half. I think that of course, we will never know. But I do think it was also an important factor that sort of changed the debate, the entire citizen preoccupation said my mindset at the moment.

Sanjay Ruparelia 33:45

I guess I wanted to close our conversation then with, in a sense, circling back to where we began, which is this is the 50th anniversary this week of the coup. From what I've read Chileans seem more polarized about the meaning of that coup today than even a decade ago. Reportedly, less than half of respondents in surveys today think the coup destroyed democracy. Whereas, you know, as far back as 2006, more than two thirds thought that it did. So how to explain this persistent or actual persistent increasing polarization over how the coup is remembered today. And is it possible to reconcile that divide in Chilean society?

Marcela Rios Tobar 34:24

Well, I think that what happened this year with a commemoration show says first, that memory politics are constitutive of democratic conflicts and debates. You know, I think what happened this year shows us how memory politics are so constitutive of democratic politics in the way that constructing memory is also a process of constructing democracies. And that is not sort of a progressive, always virtuous process that is always going to move forward as maybe we would have thought in the transitional justice mode that you know, after all, authoritarians you will always move towards memory, justice and truth. Indeed, this, this commemoration finds the country more polarized. I think it has to do with a global climate of farther polarization. Also, the rise of illiberal far right wing sectors in society, a backlash towards the constitutional process and towards the social revolt by right wing sectors that have been very important, that have gained electorally has widened the sector of society that identifies with the right. And identifying with the right means being loyal to sort of a historic project that brought the coup so I think you can not understand this polarization without understanding that 44% of Chileans voted to maintain Pinochet in power for another eight years in 1988. And the percentage of Chileans who have supported the right has all has never been less than 30%. In the entire last, you know, democratic period, those sectors because the right wing political parties were so intertwined with the military coup, they not did not just support the initial coup, they supported 17 years of dictatorship, they campaign to maintain the dictatorship for another eight years. So they have been unable to separate themselves from the tutorial political process. And I think that the rights and the strength of the far right has also diminished the space of moderate right wing politicians to be more inclined to look at the past with more critical eyes. So we are in the midst of this polarized contentious commemoration. That is also on the other side, I would have to say, part of society really emerged itself from the bottom up and top down from the government in commemorated efforts. But that was not necessarily the product of a cohesive, united vision of the country. But we'll see we're still facing two visions of our past and probably two visions of our present. So I think that the main challenge of democracy in China was how are we in this context being able to move forth to for constructing a future that is common future for everyone? Yeah,

Sanjay Ruparelia 37:25

and two visions of the future. Thank you, my salah. Thank you so much for joining me today. I've learned a lot from reading some of your work, but mostly from talking to you today. So I really appreciate your time. This podcast is produced in partnership with the Faculty of Arts and the School of Journalism and sponsored by the Jaruzelski democracy chair at Toronto metropolitan university. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe to on the frontlines of democracy on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. For more information on the 50th anniversary of the coup in Chile in the state of its democracy today. Please visit the show notes. I'm Sanjay beryllium. Thanks for listening