

October 21, 2019

We're living in a different country from that of last Thursday. No one saw this coming. The media, colleagues and friends — everyone is trying to come to terms with what happened, what it means and where the country goes from here.

In effect, there has been a slow accumulation of rising costs for public goods from transportation, water, electricity, food and housing, coupled with stagnant wages and a conservative government that has turned a blind eye for many years. When I first arrived with my family, we were struck by the number of shiny malls in Santiago as well as the beauty of its subway system. But we were also keenly aware of how expensive things like food and clothing were — even more expensive than prices in New York.

There are three aspects of the protesters that have stunned commentators here. First, the level of violence — whole subway stations burned, some 20 buses fire-bombed, the continued looting. Second, the absence of any clear political agenda or political organization leading the protests despite certain obvious levels of coordination; these protests erupted country-wide. And third, there is widespread support by the middle classes expressed as a general critique of the system even in our middle-class neighborhood. The sounds of banging on pots — a preeminent symbol of protest that dates back to the 1970s — can be heard all around us.

Having the military in the streets is also a shock, given what Chile suffered in the 1970s to 80s. After the military coup d'état in 1973, the military was in charge for more than a decade; fierce repression led to torture, disappearances and exile. The civilian protestors are solidly in charge today and it is a different military than 40 years ago, but having the military on the streets is nonetheless a painful reminder of the past.

This is clearly at the forefront of everyone's thinking and, in part, I believe has helped temper the military's response thus far. On the first night, Saturday, Oct. 19, there were scenes of the military firing in the air and then retreating; however, in Valparaiso, the repression was fierce. Last night, Sunday, Oct. 20, was a different story, as protesters openly defied the second night of curfew.

Our children are a bit nervous, wanting to know if they're safe and what it all means. Tonight we returned from some friends' house after curfew; it was impossible to get an Uber or a taxi and we told them they're living in historic times. Meanwhile, there are long lines for gas and school is canceled for Monday and possibly Tuesday. The vaunted metro system (really, a gem of the "new Chile") was directly targeted by protesters and will likely be out of commission — at least the majority of the lines — for some time.

Of course, the Latin Americanist in me is fascinated by everything happening around us, but at the same time, it is all quite disconcerting. The big question now is in regards to what kind of political solution will come about. The current government is not very inclined to propose something broad and ambitious, and national elections are not slated still for some time.

Congress rescinded the recent increase in metro fares, but that will clearly not be enough to mollify protesters or impact public sentiment, which has shifted dramatically against the government overnight. Meanwhile, the image of a modern, democratic and prosperous Chile has been shattered for at least a decade. It is a different country than it was last week and will take some time to recover, although no one knows quite what this means for the country going forward.

Eric Zolov