The unfinished transition to democracy in Chile

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Abstract

September 11, 2003 marks thirty years since the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of socialist Salvador Allende. Elected in 1970, Allende instigated a “pacific road to socialism”, internationally unique in nature, that came to a dramatic end in the September 1973. From then until 1989 Chile was ruled by the dictator General Augusto Pinochet.

The political process that emerged in Chile after the end of the dictatorship has been rightly described as a “transition to democracy.” Since the end of the military dictatorship, the transition to democracy Chile has been a political and social process marred by a series of compromises that have put a question mark against the progress in democratising a society following almost two decades of a bloody military dictatorship.

The objective of this paper is to analyse and argue that the “unfinished” nature of this process can be traced to the very foundation of the post-dictatorship transition period: the negotiated nature of the process between the former rulers and the new authorities, including the maintenance of the authoritarian 1980 Constitution.

The transition to democracy was achieved by the reaching a series of agreements and consensus framed in highly authoritarian non-democratic constitutional and institutional context and whose key feature is the element of continuity with the military dictatorship. The “unfinished” nature of the Chilean transition to democracy can also be explained by the existence of what has been called poderes fácticos (non-elected de-facto powers) and by a political class that has shown little commitment in resolving key issues, such as the increasing level of poverty and the investigation of human rights violations.