

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Life under Pinochet: Chile remembers - "Pinochet was a stigma for Chile and the world"
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During the Pinochet rule in Chile, human rights activist José Zalaquett was twice arrested and ultimately forced into exile. As a committed lawyer, the government tried to stop him from defending human rights. Here, he shares his story and thoughts of what the figure of Augusto Pinochet means today.

When Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile, 40 years ago, law Professor José Zalaquett was lecturing at the Universidad de Chile. Even though the news didn't surprise him at the time, the days that followed seemed more like a film script.

"We could see the coup coming. It was like an announced Greek tragedy, where everybody knows the end - but you cannot avoid it," he said.

As Pinochet was taking power by force, Zalaquett, his then wife and two young daughters left their home with a few possessions and went to live in relative safety with a friend on the outskirts of the city.

There, they spent hours gathered around the television watching events unfold, including the death of President Allende and the statements of the new authorities, publicly promising to "eradicate the Marxist cancer in Chile".

Shortly after taking office, the military authorities published lists of people they were looking to arrest. José's boss appeared on the first.

A dangerous job

Undeterred by the potential threat to the safety of both himself and his family, a few months after the coup, José joined the Comité pro Paz. It was a new church based organization that took on the risky job of documenting abuses and providing legal aid to detainees and their relatives.

José was in charge of collating information about hundreds of detained or missing men and women.

Events unfolded rapidly and life for Chileans became almost unrecognizable. Political parties and trade unions were banned, detentions of activists escalated and a curfew was imposed, meaning that no one could be seen on the streets between midnight and 6am.

"The military government imposed a very severe control ... if you were on the street between those times you could be shot," José remembers.

People detained were immediately taken to centres across the country, some of them secret.

Around 18,000 people ended up in the Estadio Nacional, one of Chile's largest football stadiums, that was refurbished to accommodate large numbers of people.

At the same time, the Pinochet regime established the DINA, a unit of secret political police in charge of carrying out systematic arrests and abuses against those seen as opposing the regime.

People were kidnapped from their homes, at the workplace, or in the street, - sometimes never to be seen again.

As the number of people arrested and disappeared grew, relatives of the missing began approaching lawyers such as José asking for help.

Even though there was little he could actually do, José began accompanying the relatives of those held at the Estadio Nacional. They would form long lines to leave food and clothes with the soldiers, hoping they would reach their loved ones.

“People need to know there’s a lawyer in charge, it gives them spiritual peace, knowing that they are doing everything they can for their loved ones,” he remembers.

“The military didn’t like what we did but [for a while] we were protected by the various churches.”

When the luck ran out

For two years he worked tirelessly helping political activists find asylum in local embassies and, eventually, secreting them out of the country. However when he was woken up by a loud knock on his door at 1:30am on a warm night, it came as no surprise. José knew he was a perfect target.

“I remember I told my wife to stay calm, and I went to the bathroom and took a Valium to control my nerves. There was every chance that I was going to be interrogated when they took me,” he said to Amnesty International.

Behind the door, a group of police officers were waiting. In the course of a week, he says a total of 22 people from his organisation were arrested.

José was held in detention for two and a half months – he was questioned but not tortured. However, on his release he was told to leave the country. He had no intention of doing so and after just 13 days of freedom he had another visit from the police.

“The civilian police asked me where I wanted to go and I said ‘nowhere’. So they took me prisoner and held me for 12 days.”

He believed it was all because he “didn’t get the message to stop the first time around”.

José left Chile with two military officers walking him all the way to his plane, where they sat him down and buckled his seatbelt.

He moved first to France and then to the USA, where he joined Amnesty International and a number of other Chilean exiles working to raise awareness of the human rights situation in the South American country. He was president of the organization’s International Executive Committee and later Deputy Secretary General. .

Pinochet’s legacy of fear and repression

It would take 15 years of exile before José could return home to his country.

In 1990 Pinochet was ousted, as a result of a referendum in 1988 that led to national elections and a new democratically elected government taking office in March of that year.

Subsequently José sat as a key member of the Rettig Commission that was charged with looking into the extent of the human rights violations that had taken place under the military regime.

He says that even though challenges remain, things have changed for the better. Partly as a result of his work 160 police and military personnel have been arrested for their part in Pinochet-era abuses. These and many others are currently facing trial.

“In Chile, no one argues about what happened. The newspapers that supported the military regime stopped talking about the “alleged” disappeared and now they talk about the disappeared. And even private TV channels show documentaries depicting events at that time. The truth is no longer a matter of debate,” he says.

“Today, Pinochet is a bad memory. He was the visible face of a junta that governed for 17 years. It’s a reprehensible stigma for the country and the world.”