

MCH01-93-2-2

Interview with ISABEL ALLENDE

conducted by Albie Sachs at the modest and beautifully furnished house of the Allende family in Santiago 15 January 1991. Special to the Weekly Mail.

My mother and I returned last year after sixteen years of exile based in Mexico. Coming back was a profound experience. We met up with old friends, returned to this house. We were able to arrange a proper funeral for Salvador Allende who had until then been buried in an unmarked grave. It was an important moment of reparation for all the Chilean people.

My mother gave evidence to a Parliamentary Commission on Reconciliation and Justice about the bombing of her house at the time of the coup in 1973. It is not very well known that while bombs were raining down on the Presidential Palace, they were also falling on the home where my mother was staying then (not this one).

The process from dictatorship to democracy is complicated. Our family supports the Concertation based on an alliance between the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and other parties. There is no other way. The military are real. We do not have the capacity to dislodge them by force. But even if we did, we would prefer to avoid violence if it is at all possible. We have to use political means to restore the institutions of democracy. In South Africa you have to extend them from their narrow base to include the whole population; in Chile we have to recover what we already had. My father always believed in the priority of the political over the military struggle.

The military right now are very nervous, tense. As an institution, they in fact have nothing to fear. Only individuals could be affected by investigations under way. Although the Amnesty Law adopted by the military government protects all members of the Armed Forces from anything they might have done between 1973 and 1978, it does not save them from responsibility for financial irregularities. There is the case of the so-called Pinochegues - the son of General Pinochet received cheques from the military to the value of 3 million US dollars. There also appears to have been a vast net of illegal banking involving sectors of the military.

The people do not want confrontation. the polls show that 70 per cent support the process of democratisation. But this does not mean that they will go out into the streets to confront army tanks. So much blood has already been spilt. The people are tired of living under constant tension, of clashes. They watch the political process on TV. I do not think there is much danger of

another coup at this stage, but too much tension between the government and the military can be very damaging for the country.

In the period of the Popular Unity Government 1970 to 1973, there was wonderful participation by the masses in the political process, an enormous popular creativity. But the institutions of the country were torn apart. The military coup was able to succeed because it had a degree of civilian support. Now we have less popular participation, but we are gradually strengthening the institutions of democracy.

The process of transformation is taking place very much at the top by means of agreements being made between the political parties. The Centre-Left has a clear majority in their country, but the electoral system is weighted in favour of the Right, and General Pinochet was able to nominate a quarter of the Senate, so we have to compromise with the Right as well.

This is the only way. Perhaps we could find new means of involving the masses in the process of transformation. But they would have to be new, corresponding to the new situation. The concert given by Amnesty International was a good example. For two days, 70,000 young people filled the stadium, and though the occasion was not directly political, everyone knew that it referred to political prisoners and the disappeared ones.

What makes things hard for people at the grass-roots is that little has changed in their daily lives. We have over three-hundred mayors appointed by the military still in office, while there are only five new ones. They control all local government, including health and education. In order to have elected local government, we need to amend the Constitution, and to get the necessary majority, we need the support of the Right. It is complicated. Our aim is to develop deeper layers of democracy. We have made a start, and we are confident in the future.

MESSAGE FROM THE ALLENDE FAMILY TO THE TAMBO AND MANDELA FAMILIES

It was with great joy that we learnt that after decades of exile and prison, the Tambo family and the Mandela family are once more together in their homeland. We have followed the struggle of the South African people against racial domination and for justice, democracy, human rights and peace with great admiration over the years.

the day cannot be far off when your people and our people, who have been united in their suffering, will celebrate together the achievement of full democracy. In the words of Salvador Allende as the bombs rained down on the Presidential Palace:

"Sooner rather than later, we will re-open the great avenues down which free men and women pass to build a new society."

May we see you all soon in Chile undergoing transformation. Our home and our hearts are open to you.

Sgd. on behalf of the Allende family

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ISABEL ALLENDE