

Human rights lawsuits used by Chilean “left” to mask preparations for authoritarian rule

By Mauricio Saavedra
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Two officers of Chile’s Carabinero paramilitary police have been placed under preventive detention in connection with the violent police-state repression unleashed against last year’s massive demonstrations against social inequality. The arrests came as only two dozen symbolic cases have been allowed to proceed out of many thousands of lawsuits that have languished in the courts. They have been cynically selected by the Stalinist Communist Party and their political acolytes to sow dangerous illusions in so-called Chilean democracy and parliamentarism.

Public prosecutors announced last Friday the arrest of ex-Capt. Patricio Maturana for his role in the shooting of Fabiola Campillai, 36 and a mother of three. On the evening of November 26, Campillai was shot at close range by special forces with a tear gas canister in the face, then denied assistance and left to die. It was only because of the intervention of neighbours that she survived. Fabiola has undergone numerous intrusive operations and lost her sight and her senses of taste and smell.

Maturana was removed from his post earlier that month in what was a purely administrative procedure: his superiors dismissed the sadistic cop for refusing “assistance to a victim and omitting the corresponding legal procedure.” No charges were laid. Capt. Jaime Fernández was also discharged for refusing to deliver assistance as well as giving contradictory statements—Fernández withheld his GoPro body camera that implicated Maturana in the assault on Campillai.

Alejandra Arriaza, Campillai’s lawyer, confirmed to the media what is a well-known fact: that Carabineros lie, withhold information and continually create obstacles to human rights cases brought against the institution.

“Carabineros have not made themselves available to the investigation from the first day,” Arriaza told CNN Chile, but “consistently ... obstruct justice.” Arriaza raised that many of the cops involved in the current cases are accused of previous human rights abuses, which had been left to languish in the courts.

“Had they been investigated [and] sanctioned in a timely manner, today these people would not have enjoyed the power they have to remain on the streets, to use weapons and attack the people,” she said.

These points apply especially to former Lt. Col. Claudio Crespo, who on August 21 was placed under preventive detention by Judge Marcia Figueroa, who ruled that the “accused constitutes a danger to the security of society” and posed a “danger of escape.”

The court heard that on November 8 last year Crespo, “abusing his position and with the intention of punishing,” fired 170 cartridges from a distance of 24.5 metres aiming specifically at the upper third of the bodies of demonstrators. At 6:10 p.m. psychology student Gustavo Gatica received multiple pellets to the face, resulting in his total loss of vision. The court has granted 90 days to public prosecutors to conduct a criminal investigation.

As with the Campillai case, international media attention played a role in moving Gatica’s case along. After human rights groups leaked the names of Crespo and Col. Santiago Saldivia in June, the Carabinero high command transferred Saldivia to a cushy job in the Directorate of Welfare, and discharged Crespo for an administrative infringement of manipulating the records of his GoPro camera before submitting it to internal auditors.

Had the cases not drawn the international attention, all of these cops would have remained in their posts and quite possibly received promotions. This is not conjecture but confirmed by Crespo, who has moved up the ranks despite a decade-long career of extreme violence.

In 2013, a medic from the Valparaiso region testified to an Ethical Commission against torture that Capt. Crespo tortured minors in his police van during the student demonstrations of 2011 and 2012. In 2018, Maj. Crespo was accused of firing at a protester’s face from less than five metres. During last year’s demonstrations, the now Lt. Col. Crespo was caught on camera strangling youth, threatening to shoot a firefighter as well as indiscriminately firing at protesters.

This is the modus operandi of Chile’s state apparatus. Whether under military rule or civilian government, it has resorted to violence to quash rebellious youth and militant actions by the working class. The police and the armed forces are the repressive arm of the state that maintains bourgeois law and order and protects capitalist private property.

The fascist-military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet

unleashed in the first five years after the 1973 military coup a reign of bloody terror against the political left. The working class suffered torture that oftentimes ended in forced disappearances and mass graves. The armed forces, Carabineros and secret services were permitted, with a nod from their backers in Washington, unprecedented levels of state criminality and lawlessness.

Enshrined in Pinochet's constitution were anti-terror laws that criminalised all social protest as a threat to national security. He militarised the police and made frequent use of the military in controlling civilians. These measures were an attempt to intimidate the working class and prevent the formation of any form of independent organisations as the dictatorship rammed through its free-market economic shock therapy against the population. Both centre-left and right-wing civilian governments have since only added their own authoritarian laws and sharpened old ones, especially with the outbreak of radical student protests against private education beginning in the 2000s.

Another turning point was reached with the eruption of strikes and demonstrations involving millions of workers and youth last year in opposition to social inequality, government corruption and state repression, as the deepening world economic crisis began to assert itself. In response ultra-right billionaire President Sebastian Piñera gave his "we are at war" speech that set in motion a series of draconian laws to outlaw protests. He decreed for the first time in the 30 years of civilian rule a State of Constitutional Emergency.

This allowed the military, Carabineros special forces and black berets to up the ante, knowing full well that they had institutional protection: Carabineros head Gen. Mario Rozas secretly told officers that they had his support and backing and he would not "discharge anyone by police procedure."

During the last three months of 2019, militarised police and the military fired 152,000 12-calibre cartridges, tear gas cartridges and irritant gas grenades that resulted in dozens of deaths and thousands of injuries and mutilations. There were a growing number of reports of mock executions, rape, torture and torture chambers, of severe beatings resulting in death, and forced disappearances, state crimes that have continued to occur to this day as the coronavirus pandemic tears through the country.

Amid the greatest crisis of bourgeois rule since the revolutionary period of 1968–1973 and the growing danger of police-state dictatorship, the Chilean parliamentary "left" and its satellite organisations are working to conceal the class nature of the capitalist state. This task has especially fallen to the Chilean Stalinists, who have made a political career of promoting the "parliamentary road to socialism."

The few symbolic human rights cases that have been permitted to proceed are being cynically exploited to sow illusions in the courts, the parliament and the other institutions of the bourgeois state, including that the police and armed

forces can be democratically reformed.

PCCh deputy Hugo Gutiérrez called for a "profound" restructuring of the uniformed police. Senator Alejandro Navarro, ex-Socialist Party and now head of the electoral front Progresista, lamented that "the credibility of the Carabineros is once again in question." He called on the director "to step aside." adding that La Moneda [the presidential palace] has not only the moral but also legal duty to ask him." The Human Rights Commission president, deputy Emilia Nuyado (PS), called on the minister of the Interior and the President to "demand greater collaboration from an institution that is subordinate to political power."

It is worth recalling that 50 years ago the Popular Unity government headed by Salvador Allende argued along similar lines.

"Sceptics and catastrophists will say [that] a Parliament that served the ruling classes so well is incapable of transfiguring itself into the Parliament of the Chilean people," Allende said in his first Congressional address on May 1971. "Furthermore, they have emphatically said that the Armed Forces and Carabineros, until now the supporters of the institutional order that we will overcome, would not accept to guarantee the popular will determined to build socialism in our country."

"For my part, I declare ... that since this Institution is based on the popular vote, nothing in its very nature prevents it from renewing itself to become in fact the People's Parliament. And I affirm that the Chilean Armed Forces and the Carabineros, remaining faithful to their duty and their tradition of not interfering in the political process, will be the support of a social order that corresponds to the popular will expressed in the terms established by the Constitution." The Stalinists went further as the preparations for a CIA-backed coup became ever more open, declaring the Army to be "the people in uniform."

Two years after Allende's speech, the Popular Unity government was overthrown by the US-backed Armed Forces and Carabineros, Allende was assassinated and a 17-year fascist-military dictatorship was installed over the bodies of thousands of worker militants.

It is time for the youth and working class to draw lessons from the bitter and tragic experiences repeatedly suffered under the mis-leadership of the national-reformist Chilean left and turn to revolutionary socialist internationalism advanced by the Trotskyist movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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