

Der steinige Weg der Dezentralisierung

Warum Chile vorerst zentralistisch bleibt

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Executive Summary

Chile is a centralist unitarian state. Its centre controls seventy percent of all public investments, and even on the party level, all key decisions are made by the top functionaries in Santiago. In fact, the gap between the metropolis and the remaining twelve regions is immense. While an average region received US\$ 500,000 in 2004, the capital retained more than a million. This results in dissonances between the centre and the periphery, which does not have any financial autonomy— its plight in the fields of education, health care, and employment is a case in point.

Chilean centralism cries out for reform, even from a democratic point of view. It may be true that the citizens elect their mayors and their local councils, but that does not enable them to control local or regional policy as these depend on the capital which, in turn, leaves hardly any scope for planning. There is no real willingness to reform in Chile. If we look at the interests that guide parties as well as political and social institutions some things become clear. Especially for the executive and the legislative branches there is hardly any motivation to relinquish any of their authority voluntarily.

After Chile returned to democracy, all governments at all levels embraced decentralization. On the one hand, however, the function of many cabinet members depends on the influence of the central state, for the minister for public services decides on all essential infrastructural projects. Undisciplined spending and the country's economic success argue against decentralization, so it seems. On the other hand, the sub-secretariat for regional development, whose sole task is to promote decentralization, is one of the core elements of the executive branch. Its actions, however, are largely directed by the president, who needs to strike a balance between achieving a successful reform and maintaining his own power.

Parliamentarians play a major role in the decentralization process because of their legislative function. The legislation process, however, shows that the influence of the parliamentarians fades quickly, and that they hardly leave any traces in real life. Moreover, the individual preferences of the members of the Lower and Upper House, i.e. the deputies and senators, are not in line with the objective of decentralization. Furthermore, statistics show that most parliamentarians hardly support the decentralization laws anyway, since their lives have not been shaped by rural influences; rather, they are closely linked to Santiago through their education and career.

Another way to promote a decentralized organization of the state would be to restructure the political parties. However, realities within a state inform the actions of its players, and the current structure of the Chilean party system helps to preserve the status quo.

All parties are quite agreed that the state's centralist orientation is harming the country. Even the PDC speaks of centralism as the reason why the development and growth of the country is slowing down and bureaucracy and injustice are spreading. In fact, the parties of the Chilean concertación are considerably more open-minded towards decentralization than, for example, the right-wing conservative UDI.

As regards the hostility shown towards decentralization by the Chilean party structure, the 1993 resolution of the PS and the PDP not to compete against each other in any of the districts is revealing. In the same year, the SDC and other parties of the concertación exchanged their

This kind of horse-trading with coalition partners has become a question of political survival for some of the smaller parties.

The division of the Chilean state into 13 regions, 51 provinces, and 341 communities is a creature of the former dictatorship. Any regional and communal politician wishing to assume new tasks must first persuade the central ruling power to relinquish some of its authority. The success of this concept, however, is predicated on cooperation between the communities, which generally does not exist.

Chile's decentralization is not moving forward, at least not at the regional level. This shows, for example, in the great number of institutions that lack authority, regional players that lack democratic legitimation, and regional administrations that lack financial means. While it is true that there are regional governments with so-called intendants on top, it is equally true that they are hardly more than puppets of the president, who may dismiss and replace them at will. Even the cabinets themselves, which were setup to coordinate the policies of the regional players, merely serve as a mouthpiece of the central power.

At the communal level, in contrast, decentralization has left some traces. Thus, public transport, roadbuilding, urban planning, power supply, and waste disposal are in the hands of local authorities, although their expenses generally exceed their budget. While their authority does allow some scope for competence, there is only limited political freedom. The fact that mayors may now be elected directly is a ray of hope. The resultant increase in the mayors' political weight holds out some hope for the decentralization process in the future.

However, even mayors are subject to constraints, since the distribution of power within the party leaderships at the state level directly affects local governments, paralyzing the mayors' influence, who have to bow to the centralist interests of their own parties.

Often, Chile's history is pointed at as the reason why it is impossible to break its centralist structures; after all, the country grew outwards from Santiago. Those few centrifugal forces which temporarily promised to bring strength to the regions have faded. The periphery seems to be permanently doomed to feebleness and lack of influence.

The 13 regions created by Pinochet in 1974 are artificial formations which hardly produce any feeling of identity, the only exception perhaps being Valdivia with its well-organized civil society. Since this region was integrated into the region of Los Lagos, its inhabitants have been fighting for their autonomy as well as for the recognition of their own region of Los Ríos, with Valdivia as its capital. Yet this is an exception, an encouraging exception that deserves support.

Despite the depressing state of Chile's decentralization, the country shows a high degree of organization within its civil society, which is underpinned by church institutions as well as by a network of 80,000 associations. However, there are hardly any pluralist groups which demand participation and decentralization at the grassroots. In fact, the Chilean population does not tend to question the established system or to claim more power for itself, because it is afraid that instability might arise within the state, leading to political havoc, as it did before. Thus, the relations between the population and the country's elite are characterized by alienation. In contrast to Germany, where the elites include representatives of economically weak, medium-strong, and strong societal groups in equal measure, leaders in Chile hardly come from the socially weak classes. It seems that qualifications alone do not suffice to climb the political ladder in Chile.

The path that Chile should pursue is predetermined. Direct elections should not be restricted to mayors and district councils, as they are today; rather, intendants and regional councils should be elected as well to establish a genuine representation of the people at the regional level. Moreover, it would be important to reform the election system, which currently hardly

a decentralized system of economic subsidisation, from which the farmers especially would benefit.

Compared to Chile's current system, decentralization, especially in its fiscal and functional aspect, provides important benefits. Perhaps the main task of today's supporters of decentralization inside and outside Chile is to demonstrate this to the ruling elite in Santiago.