

OPINION

Finding the 'yes' behind a 'no'

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For the first article in 2014, I am focusing on this inspiring story of Chilean history.

This is about how former Chilean dictator Gen Augusto Pinochet was voted out of power in the 1988 historical plebiscite. The plebiscite was to determine whether Pinochet, who had ruled the country since 1973, should extend his term for another eight years.

Under his repressive military regime, tens of thousands Chileans disappeared, were tortured and killed while hundreds of thousands were forced into exile.

After 15 years of repression, Chileans were – for the first time – asked to decide with the vote a straight choice of “yes” or “no”.

Because of international pressure and at the risk of losing his political legitimacy, Pinochet finally agreed to the plebiscite.

A “yes” vote meant Pinochet could remain in power. While a “no” vote meant free elections to replace Pinochet.

Surprisingly, the “no” option received 55.99% of the votes and the “yes” option only received 44.01% of the votes. The result later paved the way for democratic transition and to elections.

I am particularly attracted to the idea of a “no” campaign.

The Pinochet regime has considerable financial and tactical advantages in its “yes” campaign, which also included media monopoly.

However, the opposition, simply known as “NO” coalition was given 15-minute airtime in midnight for its “no” campaign.

The “no” campaign was granted access to television for 27 nights before the plebiscite. The campaign stressed on harmony and joy in a reunited Chile. The idea was mainly to drive Chileans to see a brighter future with its catchy slogan, “Chile, happiness is on its way.” American celebrities, such as Christopher Reeves and Jane Fonda, also endorsed the “no” campaign.

Since then, the “no” campaign and the referendum have been considered emblematic instances of the use of electoral means to defeat dictators. To counter this, the Pinochet regime backed advertisements warning voters of the violence and chaos that will follow if the opposition won.

In the months leading up to October 5, 1988, the voting day, supporters of the “no” option also launched a massive voter registration drive.

The voting process was orderly. However, the Pinochet regime kept delaying the release of official results.

As reported, after much negotiations and a failed effort by some government officials to provoke street violence as an excuse to cancel the plebiscite, at 2.40am, government television finally announced that the “no” option had won and the Pinochet regime was officially being thrown out.

The “no” campaign was arguably one of the most effective political campaigns in history. Apart from being able to achieve its goal, the campaign also saw a more than 90% voter turnout.

This remarkable campaign became the basis of a Chilean film in 2012, which was simply titled “No”. Directed by Pablo Larrain, the film reminds us of the power of optimism in the face of tyranny. After all, an important element of the “no” campaign was to create optimism in order to inspire the citizens to voice their opposition to Pinochet’s regime.

“Even in a dictatorship, the worst mistake is to not participate,” argued Genaro Arriagada, who directed the “No” campaign. For Arriagada, it was important to engage in elections, even in unjust conditions.

At a glance, the “no” campaign sounded negative and there was no candidate from the opposition to replace Pinochet. Using the rainbow as a backdrop, the philosophy behind the “no” campaign was to promote the idea that Chileans could live together in peace after years of polarisation.

Many of who appeared in the “no” campaign advertisements were intimidated and threatened during the campaign. But such is the spirit of collective decision that many people stood up publicly and inspired the nation.

There are two key messages in this article. First, the Chilean public was given an opportunity to decide whether their de facto leader should be allowed to stay in power or to leave office. Second, the Chilean story proves that people power works.

Now, isn't this story inspiring? – January 6, 2014.

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