
Chile: under the shadow of Pinochet

The "success" of the Chilean forestry model -based on pine and eucalyptus monocultures- was based on a combination of the appropriation of the Mapuche indigenous people's lands and ruthless repression. Now, when the old dictator is under arrest in England, his shadow is still present in the democratically-elected government, which seems unable -or unwilling- to repair the injustices committed during the dictatorship years.

The Mapuche have been forced to fight for their rights, mostly against the forestry companies which received from Pinochet -for peanuts- the land which righteously belonged to the indigenous communities. Those lands were planted with tree monocultures and the Chilean forestry model was then exported as a success story throughout the region. But now the model is being challenged as unsustainable, both from a social and an environmental point of view. In such scenario, the Mapuche have become the major actors in the struggle against the model.

"A Forestal Mininco estate has been occupied by the Mapuche." "Forestal Bosques Arauco's plantation taken over by Mapuche." Such are the almost daily headlines in Chilean newspapers. The tactic adopted by the Mapuche is to occupy estates during the day and to abandon them at night, only to return on the following morning to that or to another estate within their territory. In some cases, they have implemented what they call "productive occupation", which implies the cutting of the trees and the sowing of potatoes. Repression has followed, as in the -good?- old days of Pinochet.

President Eduardo Frei himself showed a certain similarity with his former predecessor Pinochet, when the leader of the Council of all the Lands -Aucan Huilcaman- was arrested for trying to deliver a letter to the President during his visit to the city of Valdivia in Southern Chile. The incident occurred after the police prevented the entry of a delegation of representatives of Mapuche communities involved in the occupation of estates to a public meeting headed by President Frei. The letter simply requested a commitment from the President to take into account the demands for land of indigenous families in Southern Chile. As Aucan Huilcaman said later, "this is institutionalized discrimination, where people are prevented to participate at a public meeting only because of being Mapuche." He then added: "the process to recover the land will continue in spite of all the actions aimed at frightening us."

Source: Equipo Nizkor, 14 December 1999.