**Democracy`s limits**

BY M A H I R A L I 2020-11-04

NOWADAYS, the notion of `foreign electoral interference` conjures up images of socalled troll farms in Eastern Europe or elsewhere spewing disinformation on social media. Whether they make much of a dif ference remains unclear. Long before the internet, the US honed multiple methods of producing the electoral outcomes it wanted to see in f ar-off lands. In places where the ploy f ailed, plan B was frequently a military coup.

That was the pattern in Chile a lucrative source of profits for American copper mining entities and other US multinationals in 1970, when the usual bribes to right-wing political forces such as the Christian Democrats did not pay of f.

The previous year, a progressive alliance had emerged, combining the socialist and communist parties with smaller forces on the left. Its presidential candidate in 1970 was Salvador Allende, a founding member of the Socialist Party and widely venerated doctor whose three previous tilts at the presidency had failed most recently by a narrow margin in 1964.

Popular Unity proved to be more than a match for the divided right wing, and Allende emerged in September as the candidate with the highest number of votes. That did not automatically win him the presidency, though: he needed parliamentary approval.

With its worst nightmare coming true, the US went into high gear. It lacked the clout to prevent that approval, but there was a viable alternative: a military coup.

The US-funded incumbent Christian Democrat president, Eduardo Frei, was reluctant to play ball. Worse still, the military chief, Gen René Schneider, was a principled constitutionalist.

A plot was therefore hatched to kidnap Schneider in order to facilitate a coup that would pre-empt Allende`s inevitable ascendancy. The idea was to blame the kidnapping on the f ar lef t, and to arrest Popular Unity leaders as collaborators. In the third attempt, Schneider was mortally wounded.

The CIA deemed it a success.

It was too clumsy a ploy, though, to facilitate a coup in a country that had a tradition of managed democracy. Allende was overwhelmingly approved by parliament, and sworn in as president 50 years ago this week, on Nov 3.

The previous June, US president Richard Nixon`s atrocious national security adviser Henry Kissinger had declared: `I don`t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people.

By September, Nixon himself had instructed CIA director Richard Helms to prevent Allende`s accession to of fice. A couple of months earlier, Nixon had already articulated his plan `to make the economy scream`a common template for electoral interference thereaf ter, especially in Latin America.

So the pawns were in place by the time Allende was sworn in. Even the new president`s parliamentary opponents could not bring themselves to reject his plan to nationalise the copper mines and even the local interests of firms such as IT T, a leading participant in the plot to bring down the new order. The Allende agenda, despite the parliamentary constraints placed on him, extended to radical agrarian reform, higher wages for the poorest workers, and women`s rights across the existing political and economic order.

Kissinger worried that if Allende`s success wasn`t aborted, the Chilean experiment could become a `contagious example` that not only might give people ideas in L atin America but `would infect` southern European members of the Nato alliance.

The Nixon-Kissinger-Helms ef forts eventually bore fruit in September 1973, and coup leader Augusto Pinochet soon became a byword for fascist autocracy in the ThirdWorld. The US-backed military dictator replaced Allende`s socialistic tendencies with the polar opposite,directlyimported from the US. Chile became a guinea pig for the neoliberal ideology of Milton Friedman and his Chicago Boys.All too many of their privatisation and small-government tenets were incorporated into the constitution that Pinochet introduced in 1980. It has been tinkered with and mildly amended here and there, but much of the toxicity at its core has remained in place ever since. The protests that erupted in Chile a year ago, which were met with a brutal response, eventually persuaded the incumbent president, Sebastian Piñera, to promise a referendum on a new constitution.

Late last month, almost 80 per cent of voters approved the idea, setting the stage for a constituent assembly next year that will have equal numbers of women and men, and a public verdict in 2022 on the document they produce. It could be a fraught process, but there will at least be the opportunity to cast aside for once and for all the blighted ideology that Pinochet represented. In the best of all possible worlds, they may even endorse Allende`s final broadcast message on Sept 11, 1973, saying that he would soon be gone, yet: `I will always be at your side, and you will remember me at least as a dignified man who was loyal to his country.` m mahir.dawn@gmail.com