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## Earthquakes and Expectations in Haiti and Chile

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## Earthquakes and Expectations in Haiti and Chile

### Abstract

Although 2010 was a bicentenary year for many countries in Latin America, that the year was a memorable one for Chileans is due less to celebrations of independence than to two disasters— one natural and one man-made—and to the country's response to them. The usual year-end retrospectives tended to emphasize the February 27 earthquake and the accident and rescue at the San José mine much more than the light shows and other forgettable pyrotechnics of the bicentenary. But as with the bicentenary, both the earthquake and the San José disaster enabled the authorities and the average Chilean to indulge in a little bit of chest thumping, an extreme example of which was the suggestion that the country's tourism and foreign investment slogan should be changed to "The Chilean Way," as if the Chilean way were a light unto the nations.

### Keywords

Human rights, Chile, Haiti, Natural disasters, Health care, Disaster preparation

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## Earthquakes and Expectations in Haiti and Chile

by Robert Funk

Although 2010 was a bicentenary year for many countries in Latin America, that the year was a memorable one for Chileans is due less to celebrations of independence than to two disasters—one natural and one man-made—and to the country's response to them. The usual year-end retrospectives tended to emphasize the February 27 earthquake and the accident and rescue at the San José mine much more than the light shows and other forgettable pyrotechnics of the bicentenary. But as with the bicentenary, both the earthquake and the San José disaster enabled the authorities and the average Chilean to indulge in a little bit of chest thumping, an extreme example of which was the suggestion that the country's tourism and foreign investment slogan should be changed to "The Chilean Way," as if the Chilean way were a light unto the nations.

Chile enjoyed its "fifteen minutes" of global fame in the wake of the mine disaster. Yet it is the contrast between the February 27 earthquake and the one that occurred only a few weeks earlier in Haiti which perhaps best illustrates what the "Chilean Way"—if there is such a thing—is really about.

The Chilean earthquake was one of the most powerful in recorded history, measuring 8.8 on the Richter scale (almost a hundred times stronger than the earthquake that hit Haiti). It caused billions in damage to buildings and infrastructure, especially in the southern city of Concepción, located close to the epicenter, and in nearby coastal regions which were devastated by the tsunamis that followed. Most of the nearly 500 deaths occurred as a result of the tsunami rather than the earthquake itself.

Compare that to the tragic earthquake in Haiti. Measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, the quake killed hundreds of thousands of Haitians, left close to a million homeless, and destroyed thousands of buildings, including the Presidential Palace and the parliament buildings. It left the economy devastated...or even more devastated. By mid-2010, not only had reconstruction barely begun, but the rubble had hardly been cleared away. Then in October, over a thousand Haitians were killed by a cholera outbreak, undoubtedly connected to the unsanitary conditions resulting from the January 12 earthquake. While it seems odd that Haitians would turn to [blaming the epidemic](#) on those sent to help them, they are instinctively latching on to something which a comparison between the two earthquakes shows: there is little that is natural about natural disasters.

Earthquakes, like many other disasters, cause deaths when societies are ill-equipped to deal with them, as the Haitian case makes so tragically clear. Building codes, zoning, escape routes, tsunami preparedness, the ability to maintain public order, all impact on survival rates in earthquakes. For these things to be designed and enforced, societies require a fairly high level of governance. For them to be implemented and respected, a sufficient degree of economic development is needed. It is difficult to see how the hemisphere's poorest country, which has been governed either by corrupt dictators, inept democrats, or foreign aid agencies, would find it difficult to implement any of these things, even if the country were as seismically active as Chile. In the face of a 7.0 earthquake, in other words, Haiti barely stood a chance.

Chileans, on the other hand, expect earthquakes. At the same time, the country has enjoyed governability and economic growth for the better part of a generation. Even earlier, following a massive 1939 earthquake that killed 5,000 people, the Chilean state established its economic development agency, CORFO, to lead the recovery through industrialization. Successive governments, democratic and less so, left and right, have continued to rely on CORFO's institutional capacity. The same cannot be said of anti-seismic building regulations which, strengthened after the 1939 disaster, were weakened during the dictatorship (relying on auto-regulation). In recent years they have been tightened up again.

All these measures helped ensure that the February 27 earthquake caused relatively little damage and death. Where things did go wrong, they had to do with human error on the part of the authorities, disrupted communications systems (representing a major flaw in earthquake preparedness, exacerbated by the fact that many were enjoying the final weekend of summer holidays), and an unusually large tourist population in coastal regions hit by the tsunami.

And yet, as in Haiti, people need someone to blame. Despite having endured far less material damage than in Haiti, Chileans do look to the authorities to lead reconstruction efforts. Early on, average Chileans as well as politicians suspected the government had been slow to respond, criticizing the outgoing president, Michelle Bachelet. Nearly a year after the earthquake, [a public opinion poll](#) shows that only twenty-six percent of Chileans believe the government of Sebastián Piñera is doing a "good" or "very good" job regarding reconstruction.

Chile's vast experience with earthquakes can teach Haitians that these events have long-lasting and often unintended consequences. They engrave images into the public consciousness and contribute to the creation of institutions that can survive for generations. Haitian officials and the international agencies charged with the task of helping them should keep this in mind as they continue the rebuilding efforts.

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*Robert Funk is Deputy Director and Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Institute for Public Affairs of the University of Chile. Dr Funk's research areas include democratization, left and populist movements in Latin America, and political elites. Recent publications include "Parties, Personalities and the President: The Institutional Challenges of the Bachelet Government", in The Bachelet Government: Conflict and Consensus in Post-Pinochet Chile, edited by Silvia Borzutzky and Gregory Weeks. From 2006 to 2008, Dr Funk served as president of the Chilean Political Science Association.*