**Open the gates of the promised land**

Yes, it’s clear: The riots are neither an indication that Chileans are fed up with the economic model in place since the restoration of democracy, nor evidence of an international left-wing conspiracy to destabilize a democratic, moderate right-wing government. The Piñera administration is clearly at fault in the way it has responded to the crisis. But there is a deeper message that runs through the student fare dodging movement and even the looting of supermarkets — which has seen people running away with televisions, refrigerators and washing machines.

After the government decreed its state of emergency, older Chileans have brought back memories of the years under military rule in the 1980s. Yet, during that era, the demand was clear and simple: Pinochet out, democracy in. Today the demand is far more diffuse. Piñera is clearly unpopular, but he is a legitimate president and his tenure has been free from major scandals. He is not personable and does not seem to care much for (or understand) what Chileans fear, want or believe. Just as the discontent did not end when the government backtracked on the subway fare increase on Saturday, a Piñera resignation would not solve the underlying cause of the riots.

When I took my first Latin American politics class thirty years ago, I learned that, having remained immune to the authoritarian wave that swept the region in the 1970s and 1980s, thirty years ago, Venezuela was the most developed and stable democracy in Latin America. But the country had three problems: high dependence on a single commodity (oil), high levels of inequality and an increasingly corrupt and unresponsive elitist political system. Other than that, Venezuela was the most successful Latin American democracy.

Today, as a professor, I teach my students that Chile is the most successful Latin American democracy, but the country has three problems: high dependence on copper, high levels of inequality and an increasingly unresponsive and corrupt political system.

Fortunately, today Chile is a much better shape than Venezuela 30 years ago. Chile is less unequal than any time before. The economy is more diversified than ever, and the ruling political elite is far less corrupt and far more responsive than Venezuela’s old establishment. Yet, the Chilean elites are not willing to open the gates of the promised land to the emerging middle class. The Chilean elites would benefit from learning the lessons from the devastating experience of Venezuela since the early 1990s. Unless the benefits of economic growth — the promised land — are more justly distributed, the promised land will turn into hell for everyone.

Time is running short for the Chilean elite to act. Auspiciously, the ruling elite seems to have heard the message loud and clear. If Chile finds a way to open the gates, the 2019 riots will not prove to be a new “Caracazo” underlining the failure of Latin American countries to overcome their legacy of instability and frustration stemming from the region’s stubborn levels of high inequality.

GLOSSARY

1. Riot: Motín
2. Fed up: Hartarse
3. Restoration: La vuelta, restauración
4. Left/ Right-wing: La Izquierda/La Derecha
5. Government: Gobierno
6. At fault: En falta
7. Fare: Tarifa
8. Dodge: Evasión
9. Looting: Saqueo
10. Decree: Decretar
11. Rule: Autoridad
12. Demand (n): Demanda
13. Tenure: Tenencia, permanencia
14. Personable: De apariencia agradable
15. Backtrack: Retractarse
16. Resignation: Renuncia
17. Inequality: Inequidad
18. Unresponsive: Ineficaz
19. Successful: Próspero
20. Copper: Cobre
21. Unequal: Desigual
22. Willing: Dispuestos
23. Growth: Crecimiento
24. Justly: equitativamente
25. Turn into: Convertirse, transformarse en…
26. Hell: Infierno
27. Running short: acabándose
28. Rule (v): Regente
29. Stem: Derivado