**The riots surprise (nearly) everyone**

As has happened so many times elsewhere in Latin America, the 2019 riots in Chile began after a government-mandated increase in public transportation fees. Yet, the similarities end there. The 3.75% tariff increase is only marginally higher than inflation. Minimum wage earners do pay about 20% of their salaries in transportation, but that cost has been going down in recent years. Besides, the fare increase was determined by an autonomous technical board, not by an International Monetary Fund-imposed austerity package. The Chilean economy will expand by close to 3% in 2019. Inflation is low and unemployment has been steady, despite the influx of close to 1 million immigrants (in a country of 17 million people) in recent years.

The riots began early last week when college students began calling for fare dodging in Santiago’s subway system—Latin America’s most modern. In a country where students have triggered massive demonstrations in the past—most recently in 2006 and 2011—the student movement caught on rather rapidly during the week. By Friday, the fare-dodging mob rallies were quickly spreading on social media and disrupting the normal functioning of the subway system.

The right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera (now in his second non-consecutive term, running until 2022) was slow to respond. When the fare increase was first announced, a government minister explained it away suggesting that people get up earlier to take advantage of the lower fare cost before 7 am. The transportation minister, who had gained notoriety for her sophisticated wardrobe, showed little sympathy for subway users and, when the fare dodging movement first began, the government’s spokesperson denounced them as misdemeanor offenders.

By Friday, the fare dodging movement had grown so strong that the subway system shut down the entire operations before the afternoon rush hour. Millions were caught for hours in traffic jams and many others chose to walk home. During my 5-mile walk home, I saw perhaps hundreds of immigrants – many of them Venezuelans, given away by their easily recognizable accents. My thoughts drifted to the so-called “Caracazo” — the protest movement that paralyzed Venezuela in 1989, after the government introduced a fare hike as a part of an IMF package – and whether history might be improbably repeating itself here.

That night, as riots and looting were taking place throughout Santiago, a visibly shaken President Piñera — who had returned to the presidential palace after being photographed in an-upper class restaurant celebrating one of his grandsons’ birthdays — announced a state of emergency, the first such occurrence in the capital not associated to an earthquake or a flood since the return of democracy in 1990. As the riots continued throughout Saturday, the government declared a curfew for Saturday night. The military patrolling the streets did not dissuade all people, and looting and riots continued through Sunday. In a country with a history of brutal military rule, the Chilean armed forces did not make full use of its abilities to try to end the looting.

GLOSSARY

1. Riot: Alboroto
2. Fee: Tarifa
3. Fare: Valor
4. Board: Comisión
5. Steady: Estable
6. Despite: A pesar
7. Influx: Entrada
8. Dodge: Evadir
9. Sybway system: El Sistema del Metro
10. Trigger: Gatillar
11. Massive: Masiva
12. Mob (n): Multitud
13. Rally: Reunión
14. Spread: Expandir
15. Disrupt: Interrumpir
16. Right-wing: La Derecha
17. Run: En curso, existente.
18. Sympathy: Empatía
19. Spokesperson: Vocero
20. Misdemeanor: Delito menor
21. Offender: Culpable, transgressor, delincuente
22. Shut down: Cerrarse
23. Rush hour: Hora punta
24. Be catch: Quedar atrapados
25. Traffic Jam: Taco vehicular, congestion vehicular
26. Immigrants: Immigrantes
27. Drift: Desviar
28. Looting: Saqueo
29. Curfew: Toque de queda
30. Patrol: Patrullar
31. Dissuade:Persuadir