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# Salvador Allende's death: a new investigation reopens Chile's wounds

Former president's family hope judge's probe will show whether Allende killed himself or was murdered in 1973 coup

Rory Carroll, Latin America correspondent and Jonathan Franklin in Santiago  
The Observer, Saturday 4 June 2011



The daughters of Salvador Allende, Isabel (centre) and Carmen Paz (second right) and congressman Juan Pablo Letelier (left) speak to journalists during Allende's exhumation in Santiago in May 2011. Photograph: Claudio Santana/AFP/Getty Images

It was supposed to end the mystery, but the exhumation of Salvador Allende's remains has so far only fanned confusion and conspiracy theories over how he died.

Politicians, writers, film-makers and human rights advocates clashed last week over whether Chile's president shot himself or was shot by someone else – maybe even both – as troops stormed his palace during General Augusto Pinochet's coup on 11 September 1973. Forensic experts have begun a postmortem examination to try to determine the truth, but the anguished debate over Allende's death – Latin America's version of the JFK conspiracy – has reopened wounds, doubts and new contradictions.

"We are searching for the truth, but we want that truth to be based on scientific proof, not on journalistic imagination, not on irresponsibility," said Isabel Allende, a senator and daughter of the former president, after a controversial television documentary suggested he was murdered.

Clearly distraught, she called the programme on state channel TVN "an insult to scientific intelligence". She told the *Observer* she had no further comment on the

exhumation, requested by her and other members of the Allende family.

For Chile, it was a week of ghosts and uneasy questions. Mario Carroza, the judge investigating the death of Allende and hundreds of others in the coup and its "dirty war" aftermath, added the Nobel prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda to his list. He will examine claims that Pinochet's agents injected poison into Neruda's stomach while he was treated in a Santiago clinic for prostate cancer. The Neruda Foundation, which administers his estate, has rejected this and said the author of *Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair* was gravely ill.

The Allende family seems equally sure the president was not murdered. When medical examiners removed his metallic grey coffin from its mausoleum in Santiago's main cemetery last Monday the idea was to bring judicial certainty to the belief that the socialist government leader took his own life as Pinochet's soldiers closed in. To avoid charges of a cover-up, a team of international forensic experts was called in to provide an independent evaluation of the decades-old evidence. The final forensic report is expected to be completed in the next 90 days.

Patricio Guijón, one of the president's doctors, had testified that he saw Allende, seated on a sofa, shoot himself under the chin with an AK-47, a gift from the Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The family came to accept that and depicted it as a courageous act for a man who had loved life.

But even if the postmortem examination endorses that view, it will be unlikely to silence those who claim Allende was assassinated by a traitor or shot by an aide in an assisted suicide.

A TV documentary, *The Doubt*, revealed a 300-page military court report compiled shortly after Pinochet seized power. It said Allende may have been shot in the face with a small firearm before being shot with an assault rifle. A fingerprint analysis of the AK-47 found no prints.

Two forensics experts who analysed the report said they believed he was shot with a small-calibre weapon first. One, Luis Ravanal, noted that photographs from the scene showed no signs of blood on Allende's collar, sweater or throat, suggesting someone else fired the AK-47: "The only explanation is that the second bullet was fired when he was already dead and in another position."

Castro, among others, has championed the theory of Allende being gunned down, a heroic end in battle concealed by Pinochet. Other allies have rejected the theory because it opens the president's aides to suspicion of killing their boss before the soldiers burst in.

A human rights lawyer, Carmen Hertz, told the radio station Cooperativa it was a travesty to accuse loyalists of killing a president whose fall ushered in the "collective tragedy" of a brutal 17-year-long dictatorship.

Camilo Taufic, a writer who has investigated the death, is convinced an aide did pull the AK-47's trigger, but as an act of mercy after Allende shot himself in the eye in a botched suicide attempt. "It was an act of human and political solidarity," he told the news website Emol.

The military report itself is the subject of mystery: the military told Judge Mario Carroza it did not exist. It was then anonymously offered for sale on the internet for

**£2,600. TVN said its copy was retrieved from the ruins of a military prosecutor's house destroyed in last year's earthquake.**

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