THIRTY four years ago, darkness descended on Chile. In the early hours of September 11, 1973, the country's armed forces led by the army chief, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, went into action to overthrow the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende Gossens.

In the three years preceding the coup, the government, the first socialist administration elected to office through popular support, had run into a series of problems that left Allende and his team reeling. And the fault for the mismanagement, indeed the chaos, that defined Chile since Allende's election lay not with him but with those who had actively conspired to keep him from being elected.

In 1970, as indications of an Allende triumph increasingly manifested themselves, Chile's rightwing elements, in good company with the American administration of President Richard Nixon, went to work to undermine the election or, if that was not possible, to steal the election. In the event, Allende was elected to office with just 36.2 percent of the votes. The day was September 4, 1970.

Once he was certain that he had been elected president, Salvador Allende, who had earlier made several attempts to gain the office, told his ecstatic supporters: "Entrare a la Moneda y conmigo entrara el pueblo. Sere el Companero Presidente" -- he would enter La Moneda, the presidential palace, in the company of the people, for he was going to be their president.

It was, as Ariel Dorfman was to note later, the moment of baptism for Allende as Chile's leader. And yet, for all the enthusiasm that greeted the socialist politician's electoral victory, things of a portentous nature were already beginning to be felt. The Nixon administration, through Henry Kissinger, had not given up its goal of creating problems for the new Chilean government.

The Central Intelligence Agency went into the job of organising people against Allende, through recruiting agents in Santiago, and pumping in money to elements ready and willing to destabilise the administration. Alongside that went propaganda against the Allende government's "attempts" to turn democratic Chile into a fortress of Marxism.

President Allende warded off all such attempts bravely, through drawing attention to the US-led campaign against the people of Chile and through employing all diplomatic means to explain to the outside world that democracy under the Marxists was safe in his country. He sent the young and articulate Orlando Letelier to Washington as ambassador, in the hope that Letelier would be able to explain to the Americans the causes behind the nationalisation program that had been launched in Santiago. To Paris, as ambassador, went the eminent poet Pablo Neruda.

None of these moves stopped the Nixon administration and the rightists in Chile from carrying on with their campaign to overthrow the Allende government. Increased funding by the CIA only reinforced the resolve of Allende's enemies to force him from office.

Steps were also taken to influence the Chilean military into moving against the government. They did not work, and would not work, till nearly the very end of the administration. Meanwhile, a strategy of economic destabilisation was worked out by the US government and its agents in Santiago. Trade unions were drawn into the anti-Allende camp, to a point where truck drivers put a brake on all their activities and brought transport movement to a halt all across the country.

As all of this went on, the wives of Chile's military officers took the unprecedented step of confronting the army chief, General Carlos Prats, and berating him over his "failure" to take action to "save" the nation. Their target was, of course, President Allende. It was an incident that left Prats deeply disturbed.

As paralysis took hold of the country, Prats resigned on August 22, 1973. He was replaced the next day by General Augusto Pinochet, considered an Allende loyalist. That sentiment would soon turn out to be the biggest irony for Chileans, for no sooner had Pinochet taken control of the army than he went into the business of planning the coup against Allende.

Over the next eighteen days, Pinochet and his fellow officers in



the air force and the police swiftly went into working out the details of the plan to overthrow the president. Secrecy was maintained in the absolute sense of the meaning. As the military and the CIA finalised their plans to depose the government, President Allende waged a desperate struggle to keep his government together. Already rumours were in the air about an impending coup. The government, however, was in little position to put its finger on what precisely was happening.

The first moves toward the coup were taken at 4 a.m. on September 11, when various military units in