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ALUMNI PROFILE

Felipe González

by Nicole L. Grimm*

Felipe González, an attorney practicing human rights and public interest law in Santiago, Chile, and a graduate of the Washington College of Law (WCL) LL.M. program, first became involved in human rights as a high school student in Chile during the era of military rule under General Augusto Pinochet. He decided to study law and pursue a career in the field of human rights, and, in 1979, began his studies at the University of Chile Law School. Although the law school did not offer formal human rights classes at the time, he learned about the topic on his own and chose a human rights theme for his final thesis, which dealt with free expression and public order.

After graduating in 1986, the *Programa de Derechos Humanos*, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) working for human rights, hired him as a staff attorney. At the *Programa*, he worked on topics such as the relationship between human rights and national security, and the protection of human rights within democratic systems. He and two other lawyers co-authored a book about the latter topic, and he wrote a number of articles concerning topics such as governments' use of states of emergency and their imposition of permanent limitations on human rights. During this period, he also worked at the University of Diego Portales Law School, where he served as a professor of the philosophy of law.

In 1990, González traveled to the United States in order to pursue his LL.M. at WCL. From his classes at WCL, he gained a broader and more systematic understanding of the jurisprudence and standards of international human rights law. In addition to taking classes, he interned with the National Security and Freedom of Expression Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, working on topics that mirrored the subject of his final thesis at the University of Chile.

In 1991, upon finishing his LL.M., he accepted an offer by the International Human Rights Law Group (IHRLG) to work in Guatemala. His project there consisted of mobilizing Guatemalan lawyers to become more involved in the movement to protect human rights. Eventually the project expanded, and the IHRLG asked him to serve as its Legal Officer for Latin America. He occupied this position from 1991 to 1993, living in Washington, D.C. Much of his work consisted of filing complaints and arguing cases before the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and he also contributed to cases appearing before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In particular, during 1993, he participated in the first advisory case before the Court in which the Court granted NGOs standing to argue before it.

In 1993, González made the decision to leave Washington and return to Chile so that he could be closer to his family and take advantage of the work opportunities available to him in Santiago. Since his return, he has maintained his affiliation with the IHRLG, serving as the group's Latin American legal representative. In this capacity, he continues to work on cases appearing before the Inter-American Commission, frequently traveling to Washington. He also monitors the activities of other OAS organs and their impact on human rights, with a special

emphasis on increasing and formalizing NGOs' representation within the OAS system. This work has been quite successful, as the number of NGOs present at the annual meeting of the OAS General Assembly increased from three in 1993 to 34 in 1997, but NGOs continue to lack formal consultative status.

In addition to his IHRLG work, González accepted a position at the University of Diego Portales Law School upon his return to Chile in 1993. He currently teaches legal philosophy and international human rights law. He is involved in a number of projects that have the objective of disseminating human rights principles throughout Chile and other South American countries. Instructors in these programs traveled to ten Chilean cities to teach lawyers and judges how to apply international human rights principles to domestic laws.

In 1995, González became the director of a newly established Ford Foundation-sponsored public interest law program that has established clinical programs at law schools in Chile, Argentina, and Peru, under the coordination of Diego Portales. The program also sponsors legal reform and education efforts throughout the three countries. Each participating school's clinic gives student attorneys the opportunity to work on cases involving issues such as human rights, discrimination, freedom of expression, and environmental protection. From 1995 through 1998, González served as the Director of the Center for Research at Diego Portales University Law School. Under his direction, the program has sponsored a number of seminars, research projects, and cooperative activities with governmental agencies and NGOs in a wide variety of areas such as military justice, environmental law, and human rights.

One additional project in which González is involved is a sweeping reform of Chile's criminal justice system, which is under consideration by the Chilean legislature. These changes will transform criminal procedure in Chile by reshaping the role of judges and providing greater protections for the rights of victims and defendants. He reviewed the original reform proposal in 1993 and has continued to work on the project since then, participating in studies such as one that examined the treatment of criminal defendants under the existing system.

González is happy with his work and his current objective is to strengthen the activities he is pursuing. He plans to strengthen the program on public interest law in areas such as non-discrimination and freedom of expression. In addition, he travels frequently to the United States for the IHRLG and Diego Portales, and maintains his WCL ties by serving on the advisory board of the WCL-sponsored Inter-American Digest Project. González believes that there is currently a window of opportunity for human rights lawyers in Latin America to bring cases on issues that domestic courts have either not previously heard or have decided "badly," such as international human rights claims and constitutional challenges to government enactments. As he puts it, there is enough work to keep him busy "for a long time." ☉

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