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Mid-Term Elections Affirm Chile's Governing Coalition

by LADB Staff

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In an election marked by major apathy, Chilean voters went to the polls on Dec. 11 for mid-term balloting to elect the entire 120-seat lower house and 20 of the 38 elected Senate seats. Voters supported the governing Concertación por la Democracia coalition, but not by a wide enough margin to enable the new Congress to eliminate the vestiges of military influence imposed during the dictatorship. The Concertación took 50.7% of the valid votes, the right-wing opposition coalition Unión por Chile took 36.2%, the Partido Comunista (PC) took 7.5%, and smaller parties took the balance. The Concertación dropped five percentage points compared with its showing in the 1993 legislative elections and was unable to wrest control of the Senate from a right-wing opposition sympathetic to the military.

Under Chile's arcane rule, a party must win twice as many votes as its opponent to gain the two Senate seats in a given district. Final results showed that the Concertación will maintain 70 seats in the lower house, compared with the 49 seats held by the Unión por Chile. In the Senate, the coalition took 11 of the seats being contested, giving it 20 seats in all, down from 21 in the current Congress. The right-wing opposition gained one Senate seat, giving it 18. Although the distribution of seats in the Senate is practically unchanged, an important shift took place within the right wing, giving hard-liners and the pro-Pinochet faction more weight.

While the Concertación has long had a wide majority in the lower house, it has always been outnumbered in the Senate, thanks to provisions in the 1980 Constitution drafted by former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), which provided for 9 designated seats in that body. In addition, Pinochet will assume the 48th Senate seat when he retires as head of the military in March. A lifetime seat for former presidents was also instituted by the 1980 Constitution.

The prospect of Pinochet in the Senate has caused a political uproar, and the Concertación was hoping for a big win in the election to enable it to amend the Constitution to eliminate that seat as well as the nine designated seats. The Concertación would need at least 25 seats to alter the "protected democracy" designed by Pinochet.

A recent poll found that 58.4% of voters are in favor of eliminating the designated posts, while 52.6% want Pinochet's "senator-for-life" post to be removed. Prospects for constitutional reforms are dim. Also at stake are other constitutional changes that the administration considers essential for a mature democratic government, including changes in the electoral system, and abolishing the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Security Council, both of which were instituted during the dictatorship.

And, President Eduardo Frei wants to remove a clause that prevents him from firing military commanders. To date, any attempts to reform the Constitution have been blocked by the opposition.

Union por Chile bloc, which includes the Renovacion Nacional (RN) and the Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI). The bloc also counts on the support of the nine designated senators and two senators from small right-wing parties. "A fully elected Congress is essential to a democratic system," Frei said after casting his vote.

"Clearly the Concertacion faces four more years of not being able to pass constitutional reforms, thus delaying the transition to democracy," said Marta Lagos, director of the local affiliate of the international MORI polling firm. Sen. Sergio Bitar, leader of the center-left Partido por la Democracia (PPD), said the right will build what Partido Comunista leader Gladys Marin termed a "Pinochet Wall" to block key legislation. "This Senate will be the stumbling block for labor laws, tax reforms, and improvements in health care and public education," said Bitar. "Is this the Senate the country wants?"

Interior Minister Carlos Figueroa, of Frei's Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), was more optimistic, pointing to past successes in cutting deals with UDI legislators. "We have never had a majority in parliament, but we reached important agreements with the UDI recently, specifically on the budget bill and educational financing," he said. "Consequently, I do not see why the UDI should close the door to matters that affect the rest of the country and the needs of the people."

Record number of protest votes, abstentions

The most significant aspect of the election, however, was the large number of citizens who chose, in one form or another, not to participate. Only 8.1 million of Chile's 9.4 million eligible voters registered before the election, and 1.1 million of those stayed home, risking a fine of up to US\$150. Nearly 1.3 million voters cast null or blank ballots, which, when combined with abstentions, put the number who chose not to vote at 40%.

Politicians attributed the protest vote as a sign of disenchantment with their opponents' views. Gladys Marin, who made a strong showing but failed to win a Senate seat for the PC in Santiago, said the disaffected were rejecting the capitalist base of society. At the other end of the political spectrum, the UDI's Jovino Novoa said voters were disgruntled with the ruling center-left coalition. Secretary General of the Presidency Jose Joaquin Brunner said that the dissatisfaction shown by the voters will receive serious consideration as the administration plans its program for the coming two years. He also said the 50% support for the Concertacion puts it in a strong position to win the next presidential elections in 1999.

President Frei acknowledged that the elections show that changes are needed. Chile has the healthiest and fastest growing economy in Latin America, but Frei said its economic progress needs to be more equitably distributed. While the administration assessed the election results, Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza warned that the Concertacion risks losing the next elections if it does not take seriously the message sent by the voters. "The Concertacion may lose the next presidential elections if it does not put internal squabbling to rest and end the arrogant behavior of some of its members," said Insulza. He emphasized the risk will be even greater if the opposition begins the presidential campaign united behind a single candidate, while the Concertacion involves itself in a divisive candidate nomination process.

The PDC has named the last two Concertacion presidential candidates and is pushing to do so again, passing over the bid by popular Public Works Minister, Ricardo Lagos, of the Partido Socialista. Business generally reacted favorably to the election results. Guillermo Tagle, chief economist at Santander Investment, said the outcome would preserve the balance of power between the executive branch and Congress that has prevailed since Chile returned to democracy, and which has forced the main political factions to sit down and negotiate every key piece of legislation, preventing either side from rocking the boat.

"This has been good for the system and I can say the results have been positive," said Tagle. Supreme Court names three designated senators Meanwhile, on Dec. 15, the Supreme Court named its designated senators, ending two months of intense speculation and lobbying over three of the Senate's nine designated Senate positions.

Within the next week President Frei will select two designated senators and the National Security Council will select the remaining four. The designation of the new senators just after the elections illustrated the imbalance in the system. In Santiago, 2 million citizens chose four senators, while 19 Supreme Court justices named three more. The Supreme Court's choice, however, was not exactly what the right had expected.

The newly named senators include Enrique Silva Cimma, who was foreign minister during the administration of Patricio Aylwin and who is allied with the Concertacion; former Supreme Court president Carlos Agurto, who has recently appeared much more open to administration policies; and Enrique Zurita, who is considered conservative but independent and open. Government officials said the designations raised hopes that some of its legislative agenda may be passed despite the increased strength of the UDI in the Senate. [Sources: BBC, 12/11/97; Agence France-Presse, 12/09/97, 12/12/97; Associated Press, 12/10-12/97; Reuter, 12/10/97, 12/11-13/97; El Nuevo Herald, 12/11/97, 12/15/97; Notimex, 12/10/97, 12/16/97; Clarin (Argentina), 12/12/97, 12/16/97; Chip (Chile), 12/16/97; Spanish news service EFE, 12/12/97, 12/18/97]

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