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Chilean Presidential Election Goes to Runoff

by LADB Staff

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No candidate in Chile's Dec. 12 presidential elections obtained the necessary 50% plus one to win in the first round. The governing Concertacion coalition candidate Ricardo Lagos and Joaquin Lavin, candidate of the right-wing coalition Union pro Chile, will face each other in the Jan. 16 runoff, and the winner will take office March 11.

The day after the voting, President Eduardo Frei urged all Chileans to turn out for the runoff, "especially those 850,000 who abstained from voting yesterday." Lagos received 47.98% of the vote, and Lavin received 47.47%. Gladys Marin of the Partido Comunista received 3.19%, while Tomas Hirsch of the Partido Humanista, Sara Larrain of the Partido Ecologista, and rightist independent candidate Arturo Frei together took 1.33% of the vote.

Right has strongest showing since transition began

Five months ago, all polls gave Lagos a clear advantage, and the strong showing by Lavin surprised Concertacion leaders. Some analysts said voters blamed Lagos, as the Concertacion candidate, for the economic recession of the past year. The recession, the first in almost 20 years, with an accompanying 11.5% unemployment rate, undoubtedly affected many voters, as did people's desire for a change after ten years of Concertacion government.

Lagos said he did not consider the results a "punishment vote" for the Concertacion, but he nevertheless said he would repackage his message so that voters would understand better his plans for governing Chile. Lagos said he saw the vote more as an indication of dissatisfaction because of the social problems affecting the country. "Yesterday, there was a vote of dissatisfaction; I am ready to assume that dissatisfaction and make it mine," said Lagos. Spain's El Pais newspaper called Lavin "the candidate of the richest and the poorest," because he retained the backing of large business owners while also attracting popular support, particularly among the unemployed.

Thanks in large part to the absence from Chile of former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) detained in London since October 1998 following an extradition request from Spain Lavin was able to distance himself from the general and even from Lavin's right-wing Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI). He said he is above party politics and interested only in managing the country like a well-run business. While his detachment from Pinochet angered some far-right supporters, his appropriation of traditional progressive themes such as jobs and housing won votes from among poorer Chileans.

Most analysts agreed that Pinochet's absence worked in Lavin's favor (see NotiSur, 1999-10-15). Lagos lost support among the more conservative members of the Concertacion as his opponents made frequent reference to "another socialist president" and a "return to [former president Salvador] Allende." And his defense of the Frei administration's efforts to return Pinochet to Chile also cost him support from those on the left.

The closeness of the vote reflected the deep division in Chilean society that has become more pronounced during the 10- year transition. At a workshop analyzing the Chilean election, University of Notre Dame political specialist Julio Samuel Valenzuela said that, since the transition to democracy began in 1990, the political system has been defined by "si" and "no," those in favor of continuing the dictatorship and those opposed, rather than the three tendencies left, right, and center that alternated in power in Chile for decades before the 1973 coup.

Analysts with Corporacion Tiempo 2000 said the success of the right in winning votes among the middle class and among women, "areas where the right had problems before," was significant. For many voters, Lavin succeeded in tying Lagos to the administration's failure to resolve the nation's social conflicts and its ambivalent stance on issues such as health, security, and job security. "The Concertacion can point to really significant macroeconomic figures," said a Corporacion Tiempo 2000 analyst. "To end the year with 1.7% inflation is really very good by World Bank standards, but those who vote are ordinary people for whom that figure means nothing next to 11% unemployment."

Runoff strategy: convince absentee voters

Lavin and Lagos immediately began campaigning for the runoff, with both concentrating on the minority parties and especially on the absentee voters. The 3% blank and annulled votes, plus the 10% of eligible voters who stayed home, totaled more than 1 million votes. Lavin will continue with his message of change and social peace that worked for him in the first round, said his campaign director, Francisco de la Maza. He said Lavin's "spectacular" showing at the polls is clear evidence that the great majority of Chileans want to begin the next century in a new way.

Concertacion officials are gearing up to revamp the problem-ridden campaign that was hurt by overconfidence. Justice Minister Soledad Alvear quit Dec. 14 to join Lagos's campaign in what some saw as an effort to win more women voters. Alvear, a lawyer, has been named in many surveys as one of the best ministers in Frei's Cabinet. Everything indicates that the runoff will be as close as the first round. If Lagos wants to defeat Lavin, he will have to discredit Lavin's populism and emphasize his right-wing affiliation and ties to the Pinochet dictatorship.

Communists condition their support for Lagos

Following the election, the Partido Comunista put Lagos on notice that he would have to take a more progressive stance if he wants their support in the runoff. PC leader Gladys Marin blamed the Concertacion's adoption of free-market neoliberal policies for Lavin's strong showing. Marin said the PC plans a meeting with its rank and file to strategize for the second round. "We are not calling for people to vote for the lesser evil," said Marin. "We're not calling on people to back the Concertacion candidate. We are saying that here was a tie between two sides of the same coin neoliberalism."

Marin said she wants a commitment from Lagos on such issues as a plebiscite to reform the Constitution, improvements in the labor laws, and greater equity in income distribution. Lagos has included all these issues in his platform and in his main slogan, "growth with equality." But there is no agreement between the PC and Lagos on the future of Pinochet or on how to handle cases of major human rights abuses committed during the dictatorship.

Although few in number, Marin's votes are crucial to Lagos if he is beat Lavin. But he will have to tread carefully if he hopes to win the PC vote without alienating the Concertacion's more conservative members. "We want the Amnesty Law annulled, an end to government efforts to repatriate Pinochet, and a policy favoring trials for violators of human rights," said Marin's campaign spokesperson, Tomas Mouliau. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 12/10/99, 12/13/99; Clarin (Argentina), CNN, El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 12/13/99; Spanish news service EFE, Notimex, 12/13/99, 12/14/99; Reuters, 12/14/99]

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