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Ricardo Lagos Wins Chilean Presidential Runoff Election

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Ricardo Lagos, Socialist candidate for Chile's governing Concertacion de Partidos por la Democracia coalition, won the runoff election Jan. 16 and will begin his six-year term as president on March 11. Lagos narrowly defeated rightist candidate Joaquin Lavin of the Alianza por Chile. Lagos took 51.32% of the vote to Lavin's 48.68%. Turnout was heavy, with more than 7.3 million of the 8 million registered voters casting ballots.

Lagos, a US-trained economist and former minister of education during the administration of former President Patricio Alywin (1990-1994) and of public works during the present administration, said he would not be "the country's second Socialist president, but the third Concertacion president." Both Alywin and outgoing President Eduardo Frei are members of the Partido Democata Cristiano (PDC), while Lagos is a member of the Partido Socialista (PS).

Lagos' victory will bring a power shift in the Concertacion, which also includes social democrats. "A new spirit is spreading across our land," Lagos told supporters. Acknowledging Hortencia Bussi, widow of former President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), in the audience, he said, "I want to resolve the pains of our past. There is space here for everyone. I haven't forgotten the past, but my eyes are open to the future."

Before Lagos' victory was announced, Lavin conceded defeat and went to his opponent's campaign headquarters to congratulate him. "We shouldn't be sad because we had a spectacular number of votes," Lavin told supporters. "And I am confident that in the future, the message of change that we brought into Chilean politics will prevail." Lavin said that Lagos "can count on me. I am at his disposal to help him face Chile's problems and to work for unity among Chileans."

Alberto Cardemil, president of Renovacion Nacional (RN), part of the Alianza, said that the strong showing by Lavin promised "a center-right unity." "We are going to be a clear, strong, always constructive, and vigilant opposition," said Cardemil, adding that "Lavin will have a very important role in the next six years."

Candidates' platforms similar

In Chile, candidates are not required to declare how much they spend or who their contributors are, but a government report indicated that Lavin outspent Lagos by 7-to-1. During the campaign, both candidates promised to fight rising street crime, aid struggling farmers, and create hundreds of thousands of jobs. Six months ago, Lagos enjoyed a comfortable lead in the polls and a first-round victory seemed possible, but Lavin surged ahead, using the current recession to rally voters, particularly the 20% of Chileans below the poverty line.

For Lagos, the economic recession was a serious handicap. After an average rate of 7% for almost a decade, the economy shrank 1% last year and unemployment is at 10%. Both critics and supporters
of Lagos said he was also hurt by a poorly run campaign. For months, he used the slogan "growth with equality" and gave speeches that did little to ignite the interest of voters.

Lavin, a supporter and member of the ultraconservative Catholic Opus Dei movement, is a proponent of the death penalty but opposes abortion and divorce. He waged the first serious right-wing challenge to the Concertacion since the "transition to democracy" began in 1990. Both in the first campaign and before the runoff, Lavin ran a slick, media-savvy campaign, offering solutions to concrete problems such as crime, insufficient health care, and unemployment.

Lavin's unexpected popularity forced Lagos to modify his campaign style in the second round and to change his message. Enlisting top advertising experts, Lagos shifted his focus from economic equality to Chile's modernization under the two Concertacion governments. He also noted the concerns of the people. While playing down his history with Allende, Lagos still promoted social reform and pledged to put more emphasis on issues such as housing, education, and health. Analysts say he will move the country only slightly to the left.

Throughout the campaign, both Lagos and Lavin avoiding mentioning former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), whose importance had diminished as a campaign issue for most Chileans when the presidential campaign began six months ago. Pinochet has been detained in Britain since October 1998 on a warrant from a Spanish judge who wants to try the general for alleged human rights abuses during his rule.

Both Lagos and Lavin agreed that Pinochet should not be above the law and should be brought to trial if he returns home. Lavin, a successful two-term mayor of Las Condes, one of Santiago's wealthiest suburbs, was a strong supporter of Pinochet's military regime. He was a junior economist at the Planning Ministry under Pinochet and has written several books praising his regime. During the campaign, however, he said Pinochet was part of the past and it was time to look to the future.

Lagos was slated to become ambassador to Moscow when the 1973 coup toppled the Allende government. He went into exile, and spent several years teaching in the US. When he returned, his opposition to the military regime brought him into the political spotlight. Lagos' moderation through the campaign frustrated some in his own party and particularly angered Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) leaders who considered withholding support for Lagos in the runoff. Although when the campaign began Pinochet was not a major issue, he returned to the political stage at the last minute.

Just days before the runoff, British Home Secretary Jack Straw announced that a panel of doctors concluded Pinochet is too ill to face trial. Straw said he felt inclined to send the former dictator home (see other article in this edition). The candidates and many analysts agreed that Straw's announcement had little if any influence on the campaign.

Nevertheless, some analysts said Pinochet's probable repatriation could have influenced voters, especially the more than 800,000 who abstained in the first round. Gonzalo Townsend Pinochet, nephew of the general, called the outcome of the runoff a punishment against Lavin "for disloyalty."
"Six months ago we told Lavin he would pay dearly for his disloyalty," said Townsend, referring to Lavin's distancing himself from Pinochet and the military dictatorship.

Lagos says he will emphasize economic growth, education Lagos received attention by promising unemployment insurance, as Chile's 15 million people seek to improve the social safety net. "Chile has to be able also to have a more just, more equitable society," said Lagos. He said unemployment and labor reforms would be "fundamental priorities" in his six-year term.

The 10% unemployment rate, about 599,000 workers, is one of the biggest problems that the president-elect will face. "The government's agenda must include growth with more equity, with greater possibilities for every one of our children," said Lagos. But completing the transition to democracy will also be a priority for Lagos, who has called for a new constitution and for more civilian control of the military. [Sources: Reuters, 01/13/00, 01/17/00; The New York Times, 01/16/00, 01/17/00; Clarin (Argentina), CNN, Inter Press Service, Spanish news service EFE, The Miami Herald, 01/17/00; Associated Press, 01/17/00, 01/18/00; The Financial Times (London), 01/18/00]