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LADB Staff

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Bachelet and Pinera To Runoff

by LADB Staff

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The results of Chile's first-round ballot in the presidential election Dec. 11 will mean a runoff vote between socialist Michelle Bachelet and conservative businessman Sebastian Pinera. The tally knocked another conservative candidate, Joaquin Lavin, out of the race, along with Tomas Hirsch. Pinera and Bachelet will now face off in a Jan. 15 vote, with poll numbers suggesting that Bachelet will win that contest.

Bachelet's ruling coalition also made strong gains in congressional elections. With 99.3% of ballots having been counted, preliminary results showed that Bachelet had won 45.9% of the vote, falling short of the 50% she would have needed to win in the first round. Pinera was her closest competitor with 25.4%, while Lavin received 23.2%. Hirsch, representing a coalition of groups including the Partido Comunista (PC) and Partido Humanista (PH), came in fourth with 5.4%. That count tallied almost 6.9 million votes.

Polls: Bachelet will be first female president of Chile Bachelet, 54, is a member of the Partido Socialista (PS), which, along with the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) and the Partido Por la Democracia (PPD), makes up President Ricardo Lagos' ruling Concertación coalition. She is a pediatrician and, as is frequently reported, a single mother. Bachelet became the country's first female defense minister in 2002, after President Lagos transferred her from the top spot in the Health Ministry (see NotiSur, 2002-01-11). She is the daughter of Air Force Gen.

Alberto Bachelet Martínez, who was arrested after the 1973 coup by former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende (1970-1973). Gen. Bachelet died on March 12, 1974, in a Santiago prison, becoming one of the highest-profile victims of the armed forces' purge aimed at removing all officers and uncommissioned officers opposed to the coup.

The 1991 Rettig Report on human rights abuses during the dictatorship said that Gen. Bachelet died "as a consequence of the torture and mistreatment suffered while he was in prison." Two years after her father's death, Bachelet and her mother were arrested and tortured by the Pinochet regime before they fled first to Australia and then to East Germany. "I am a woman, socialist, separated, agnostic, they told you 'all the sins together' daughter of a father who died in jail," Bachelet has said to friends.

The mother of three children, newspapers say she is regularly seen shopping in grocery stores like any other head of household, but her background growing up in a military context gives her the ability to reach out to Chile's armed forces' constituencies. She reportedly speaks English and Spanish, and is able to fluidly use French, German, and Portuguese.

Regarding her failure to gain a first-round win, Bachelet said, "I would have liked to have won in the first round." For months Bachelet has held a double-digit lead over her competitors, but was never able to get majority support in the four-way race.

In November, one survey showed her popularity slipping down to the high 30% range, but she recovered back to the mid-forties after one of several televised debates. "I take this as a reason to work harder, to push ourselves even harder, because after all, women are used to working twice as hard," she added to loud applause. The same polls that accurately predicted her Dec. 11 performance also show Bachelet winning the vote a month from now. If victorious, she would become not only Chile's first female president but also the second woman to be elected head of government in South American history.

Guyana elected Janet Jagan (1997-1999), widow of President Cheddi Jagan(1992-1997), in 1997. During the campaign, Bachelet enjoyed effective incumbency, conferred with the general approval for Ricardo Lagos' administration. Lagos has popularity ratings of 71% almost six years into his term, owing in part to expansive economic growth as well as unprecedented moves to prosecute and expose human rights abuses from the Pinochet era and reform the government that Pinochet erected. But Lagos' high popularity figures did not completely transfer to Bachelet, and her inability to win a first-round triumph had some analysts doubting her strength.

Bachelet suspended the closing ceremony of her campaign when a bus carrying her campaigners crashed in southern Santiago on Dec. 6, leaving five dead and 20 wounded, including her 25-year-old cousin. The accident occurred when the bus, returning from the city of Temuco, crashed with a truck and a car, falling a short distance into a river. The other three candidates expressed sympathy to her and the campaigners' families.

Defeated Lavin heads Pinera's second-round campaign Pinera joined the presidential contest when it became evident that Lavin was struggling fruitlessly to cut into Bachelet's overwhelming lead, shown in multiple opinion polls. His candidacy split the Alianza por Chile coalition of conservative parties. Pinera headed the more moderate Renovacion Nacional (RN) ticket, while Lavin represented the more right-wing Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI). The two attacked each other and refused to sign alliance pacts prior to the Dec. 11 vote, but were reconciled the day after Lavin was knocked out of the running. The two announced that Lavin would take charge of Pinera's campaign in the second round.

The 56-year-old Pinera, with an estimated US\$1.2 billion fortune, owns some of the country's most important businesses, including airline LAN-Chile and television network Chilevision. Pinera claims his own sacrifice led to his wealth, since his father "was a public employee" and his inheritance "was an envelope fat with bills to pay."

Pinera, a commercial engineer who is married and has four children, served as a senator from 1990 to 1998. With graduate degrees from Harvard, Pinera was a consultant for the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) from 1974-1976. He began to amass his fortune during the Pinochet dictatorship, for which PC candidate Hirsch criticized him during the campaign. The privatization of the national airline in the 1990s benefited him greatly (see NotiSur, 1994-06-02). He

is one of the country's wealthiest businesspeople, with important stock holdings in firms that deal in forestry, shipping, and retail, though the main jewel of his treasure box is the control of LAN-Chile that he shares with the Cueto family.

Chilevision executives had to defend themselves against criticism from the Lavin camp that the network was giving favorable coverage to owner-candidate Pinera. To avoid conflicts of interest, Pinera resigned from the boards of the businesses he participated in and announced that, if he won the presidency, he would sell all his stocks. But analysts see his meteoric business and university career as a double-edged sword, with citizens potentially identifying less with his powerful biography than with Lavin or Bachelet, whose strength derives from the identification they have built among voters.

Pinera had the opportunity to run for president in 1993, but a scandal with his competitor and fellow party member Evelyn Matthei resulted in both RN candidates being banned from running in the race (see NotiSur, 1992-11-10 and 1993-01-26). Pinera's political connections are not purely right wing, which adds to his moderate credentials. His father was a militant in the PDC, and two of his brothers are members of Concertacion. He has captured more of the centrist vote that Lavin could not attract.

Pinera distinguishes himself from other conservatives by having openly opposed the Pinochet dictatorship. He has made inroads against Bachelet since entering the race in May with a platform aimed at the middle class and poor, including offers of pensions to housewives and incentives to small and medium-sized enterprises. The Pinera-Lavin team presents a strong challenge to Bachelet, who must try to pick up votes from the leftist contingent that voted for Hirsch and the centrist votes wavering between her and Pinera. Hirsch has said he will cast a blank vote, refusing to lend personal support to Bachelet.

One of Bachelet's top aides, Jaime Mulet, played down concerns about the two right-wing candidates winning more combined votes. "Their votes cannot be added. You don't add apples and pears," Mulet said. Pinera will have to double the number of votes he received in the first round to take the presidency. Neither candidate plans to make serious changes to the economic model implemented by the Lagos administration. Only Hirsch challenged the neoliberal economic practices that have brought Chile into several free-trade pacts in Asia, the Americas, and Europe. Both Bachelet and Pinera campaigned on promises to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and curb an 8% unemployment rate and rising crime in large cities.

Concertacion coalition gains seats in Congress

Chilean daily newspaper El Mercurio reported that the victor of January's vote would be working with a Senate and Chamber of Deputies that are younger and more left wing than the current Congress. Votes on Dec. 11 propelled the Concertacion coalition to its first majority in the Senate since coming to power in 1990. The UDI maintained its top spot among Alianza parties, while the PDC lost many important seats. The losses in the PDC and wins for PS-PPD candidates not only took the Congress further leftward but the Concertacion coalition as well.

In the Chamber of Deputies, Concertacion members took 65 seats and the Alianza 54. In the Senate, the average age has dropped from 65 to 55, with Concertacion candidates winning 20 seats, the Alianza 17, and the other seat going to Independent Carlos Bianchi. The Senate was reduced from 48 to 38 seats after reforms eliminated senators-for-life and "designated" senators who did not face election. The UDI gained ground against the PDC, reinforcing its position as the top single-party force in the Chamber of Deputies with 34 seats. The PPD is the second force in the chamber, with 22 seats. The PDC dropped from 24 seats to 20, demonstrating a serious stumble on the part of the Christian Democrats.

PDC party head Adolfo Zaldívar apologized for the loss of seats in both the Senate and the lower house, but said he would not step down. PDC leader and daughter of President Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970), Carmen Frei Ruiz-Tagle was among the senators losing their re-election bids. One important reform that the Congress will likely take on is the binomial election system, a Pinochet-era construct that allows disproportionate power to opposition parties while excluding minority parties. Lagos failed to eliminate the system altogether, but the legislative coalition he built did remove it from the Constitution (see NotiSur, 2004-10-22 and 2005-08-19), meaning future legislatures will not need as large a majority to remove the system from Chilean politics.

Concertacion leaders call the system authoritarian and undemocratic, but the 65-54 majority held by the Concertacion in the lower house is insufficient to guarantee a reform. Four-sevenths of the chamber, or 68 votes, would be necessary to change norms of "organic constitutional law," such as the binomial system. Constitutional changes would need three-fifths, or 72 deputies. Norms needing a two-thirds supermajority would require 80 votes. The binomial system currently requires the four-sevenths majority, meaning the Concertacion would have to reach out to Alianza lawmakers to eliminate it or any other legal reforms that require more than a simple majority.

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