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Bachelet Wins Election

by LADB Staff

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Michelle Bachelet, a 54-year-old pediatrician from the Partido Socialista (PS), won Chile's Jan. 15 presidential runoff against billionaire businessman Sebastian Pinera of the center-right Renovacion Nacional (RN) with a lead of seven percentage points. This will make the former health and defense minister the first woman president in Chilean history, a victory made all the more poignant because Bachelet was also a political prisoner and in exile during the regime of former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Her inauguration is set for March 11, when she will take over from her former boss, President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), who was constitutionally barred from seeking a second consecutive term.

Four more years of Concertacion rule

With 99.71% of ballots counted, Bachelet brought in 53.49% of the vote, with 3,712,587 voters checking her name. Pinera received 46.50% or 3,227,395 votes. Pinera conceded the night of Jan. 15. Bachelet's triumph brought her more votes than Lagos received in 2000 (see NotiSur, 2000-01-21), and their Concertacion coalition also got 1.7% more votes than it received last December (see NotiSur, 2005-12-16).

Bachelet served at the head of two ministries in the Lagos administration, first in the Ministry of Health and later in the Ministry of Defense, the latter being another gender first (see NotiSur, 2002-01-11). Her background as the child of a military man has often aided in her management of the armed forces. Bachelet ran under the banner of the incumbent Concertacion coalition, which brings together left-of-center and centrist parties like the PS, the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), and the Partido Democraata Cristiano (PDC).

Pinera represented the conservative Alianza por Chile, the coalition of his RN and the Union Democraata Independiente (UDI). Although UDI candidate Joaquin Lavin joined Pinera's runoff campaign as soon as he was knocked out of the first round, Jan. 16 estimates indicated that more than 125,000 of the votes he received did not transfer to Pinera. UDI and RN figures criticized Lagos for "interfering" in the electoral process.

In the last days of his campaign, Pinera called on Lagos to stay out of the campaign. "Presidente, stop intervening in the election!" Pinera shouted to a crowd of supporters on Jan. 11. But the cry echoed more like a cry of desperation, as when, two days earlier, Pinera tried to minimize Bachelet's ability to speak five languages, saying what was important was to speak "the language that interests Chileans." In addition to Spanish, Bachelet can speak English, French, German, and Portuguese and reportedly has some skill with Russian.

Exit polls showed that a slightly higher percentage of men than women, less than 1%, voted for Bachelet, although over 400,000 more women than men, some 5.8% of the total, voted, meaning

the absolute number of women's votes for her far exceeded men's votes. During the campaign, Bachelet enjoyed something like incumbency, with the general approval for Lagos' administration transferring to her. Voters didn't give her the 60% to 70% of the vote that recent polls on approval ratings have given to Lagos, but she did bring in more votes than her predecessor did in his 2000 victory.

Steady economic growth in 2005, which the Banco Central estimates to have reached 6.3%, has contributed strongly to popular support for the Concertacion. The Banco Central forecasts a GDP growth rate of between 5.25% and 6.25% for 2006. The Concertacion coalition will control a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time since it took power in 1990. Now members of the PDC and PPD are jockeying for positions in the future Cabinet, while leaders of Bachelet's PS expect to take the greatest number of positions in her administration. Bachelet also intends to name women to head half of the ministries, which may continue to fuel the engine that has produced prominent female political figures in Chile.

Soledad Alvear, the former foreign relations minister under Lagos who dropped out of the president's race when it became clear that she could not cut into Bachelet's wide lead in the primary elections (see NotiSur, 2005-06-10), announced shortly after the Jan. 15 election that she would be running for the presidency of the PDC. Bachelet will need to maintain the Concertacion coalition during her term and may have to make moderating overtures to the Christian democrats of the PDC to keep the more centrist party content.

Chile's 1st presidenta, continent's 1st elected non-widow

Bachelet is 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. Bachelet's win made her South America's first popularly elected woman president who gained office without the death of a husband. Argentine Vice President Maria Estela 'Isabelita' Martinez de Peron became Latin America's first female president after her husband, Juan Domingo Peron (1946-1955, 1973-1974), died in 1974. The military seized power from Martinez's constitutional government in 1976.

In Bolivia, Lidia Gueiler Tejada, head of the Chamber of Deputies, served as interim president after a 1979 coup forced Walter Guevara Arce, himself an interim president, from office. Congress rejected the military coup against Guevara and installed Gueiler in anticipation of a new round of elections, but a bloody coup in 1980 forced her to flee, after which Luis Garcia Meza (1980-1981) installed himself as dictator. Dr. Bachelet also joins the club of medical-doctors-turned-presidents in the region, with Abel Pacheco in Costa Rica, Alfredo Palacio in Ecuador, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay all being former practitioners of medicine.

A free-trader socialist, not a Bolivarian revolutionary

Many international press reports characterized Bachelet's ascent as typical of the serial electoral successes of left-wing governments throughout the region. Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Bolivia have handed power to candidates from the more progressive political sectors. Yet

Bachelet's socialism differs radically from that of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, the region's most prominent revolutionary executive who calls his project a Bolivarian alternative, referring to 19th century independence leader Simon Bolivar. Where Chavez has declared the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement dead and buried (see NotiSur, 2005-12-02), Bachelet has expressed willingness to combine the goals of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the FTAA.

"The agendas of MERCOSUR and the FTAA are not incompatible, as is sometimes put forward," said Bachelet in a conference with foreign journalists after her win. She said her government "would be very active in promoting the FTAA," although she said that support would not be unqualified. Her government "will be available to advance [the FTAA's] objectives, but a basic FTAA that takes into account the diverse realities and needs for development of each country."

An analysis by Argentine newspaper Clarin says Chile has a smaller industrial base that would face debilitating competition under the FTAA, unlike Argentina and Brazil, currently prominent opponents to the deal. With 70% of its GDP coming from foreign commerce, compared with Argentina's 40%, Chile would have much more to gain and much less to lose from a large-scale market-access deal. Bachelet's win, by most accounts, represents continuity in Chile more than it represents change.

One of the world's most liberalized economies, Chile has free-trade agreements with more than ten countries in the Americas, Asia, and Europe, with more being negotiated. Business analysts expect Bachelet to follow the same fiscal policies of the Lagos administration.

Santiago daily El Mercurio quoted a high Concertacion official saying, "What other alternative exists? It is illogical to think about a drastic change!" Some critics said that her campaign promises lacked specificity, but she did say that she sought to build an inclusive government.

Under her plans, the government will provide childcare for poor working women and ensure early education for the 65% of children that do not attend preschool. She also pledged to spend US\$180 million next year to increase government pensions for the elderly and said she will send a bill to Congress to ensure that more workers are covered under the country's private pension system at a lower cost. The system, which has been used as a model in nations such as Argentina and Poland, was created in 1980 during the dictatorship to replace a government-funded social-security system. Its shortfalls have been pronounced (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11). She also intends to remove the binomial electoral system, a vestige of the dictatorship that hinders smaller parties from gaining seats, something Lagos has been working toward (see NotiSur, 2003-06-27, 2004-10-22, and 2005-08-19).

She will need cooperation from the opposition to do so. She will also likely continue the reconciliation effort that Lagos' administration has undertaken (see NotiSur, 2004-11-19). Bachelet promised tolerance in her Jan. 15 victory speech. "Because I was the victim of hatred, I have dedicated my life to reverse that hatred and turn it into understanding, tolerance, and why not say it into love," said Bachelet, whose father died in prison.

Bachelet's father was an Air Force general who was arrested and tortured for opposing the 1973 coup that brought Pinochet to power. Alberto Bachelet died in prison of a heart attack, probably caused by the torture, Bachelet says. A 22-year-old medical student at the time, Bachelet was also arrested, along with her mother. They were blindfolded, beaten, and denied food for five days while their cellmates were raped an ordeal she does not want to talk about except to say she and her mother were "physically mistreated." She insists she harbors no rancor because she has "a political understanding of why those things happened." They were later forced into exile for five years, first in Australia, then in East Germany, where Bachelet married a fellow Chilean exile with whom she had two children. They later separated, and she had a third child from a new relationship.

Back in Chile, Bachelet worked underground with other leftist exiles, quietly advancing in the PS and gaining prominence in the Concertacion in the 1990s. Although the Concertacion holds both houses of Congress for the first time, Bachelet said at a news conference on Jan. 16 that her government would be one of dialogue and unity and that she would often consult about legislative initiatives with the opposition.

Ariel Dorfman, a former advisor to deposed President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and currently a professor of literature and Latin American studies at Duke University, enthused over Bachelet's victory. "When I heard that Michelle Bachelet was the new president of Chile, I felt somehow the same enthusiasm, the same thrill that I felt when we defeated Pinochet in the plebiscite and the sort of hopes that opened up, the expectation that opened up when we elected the first democratic president, Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), in 1990," said Dorfman in an interview. Dorfman, like most analysts, doesn't anticipate that Bachelet the Socialist will actually lead Chile toward socialism, "as it was many, many years ago with Salvador Allende. But I think that it signals a really bellwether change in Chile and in the rest of Latin America. It's part of a whole tendency toward a continent that wants to take its destiny in its own hands."

Some US press outlets characterize the rise of left-wing leaders as falling dominoes, a reference to the now-discredited theory of how Communist regimes would proliferate successively through the developing world during the Cold War. Proponents of the current movement like Dorfman, however, characterize the trend as an effort by Latin American countries to take greater control of their national resources and political independence.

Members of Chile's right-wing parties like Sen. Hernan Larrain of the UDI said Bachelet would represent "the hard left" and her win would mean "the end of the policy of agreements" that brought political stability to government. But few analysts concur, since the true hard left of the country, as represented by the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), offered only tenuous and delayed support to the Concertacion candidate after its candidate, Tomas Hirsch, only brought in about 5.4% of the vote.

In Dorfman's estimation which is typical of many observers Bachelet will "not be a rabid left winger." President Lagos to attend Morales inauguration in Bolivia Lagos waited for the day after the vote to announce that he would accept Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales' invitation to attend his Jan. 22 inauguration. The offer has the potential to be the beginning of a historic reconciliation of the two countries.

Chile-Bolivia relations will be one of the most important issues facing Morales and Bachelet, with Bolivia demanding sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean. The Lagos administration has shown a willingness to deal with Bolivia's demand (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23, 2005-07-29), though Chile's government has not gone into formal talks nor made any offer. Bolivia's gas reserves could prove extremely valuable to Chile's economy, which is dependent entirely on imports for its supply and has been suffering through an energy crisis caused by intermittent gas shortages (see NotiSur, 2004-04-30).

Efforts by previous Bolivian administrations to export gas through Chile have met fierce popular opposition, however, because of the ocean-access issue (see NotiSur, 2003-09-26). Bachelet declined an invitation to attend Morales' inauguration but said, "In the future I will have the opportunity to extend ties to the neighbor country." She wants to conduct "a very broad dialogue without restrictions and have the best possible relationship."

Relations with Chile's northern neighbor, Peru, will also be a serious challenge to the Bachelet presidency. Peru has had a number of conflicts with Chile, most recently a dispute regarding ocean fishing rights (see NotiSur, 2005-11-18). Peru will hold an election in April and leading candidates have used resentment of Chilean economic strength and border policy as a rallying cry in their campaigns.

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