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## Michelle Bachelet Inaugurated President

by LADB Staff

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Michelle Bachelet, a 54-year-old pediatrician from the Partido Socialista (PS), became president of Chile on March 11, the first woman to hold the post. She replaced President Ricardo Lagos, her former boss when she held top posts in the Ministries of Health and Defense. The new president moved immediately to expand social security protections for Chilean citizens, strengthen ties with Bolivian President Evo Morales, and seek to establish gender parity in her high-level appointments. She won the general-election runoff last January as the candidate of the Concertacion coalition of center-left parties (see NotiSur, 2006-01-20), beating businessman Sebastian Pinera of the center-right Renovacion Nacional (RN).

### *From tortured political prisoner to top executive*

Bachelet suffered prison, torture, and exile under Chile's military dictatorship. She also lost her father, an Air Force general opposed to the coup against President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), to the murderous rampage that marked the early days of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Then a 22-year-old medical student, she was briefly imprisoned and tortured along with her mother before being forced into exile. Bachelet vowed at her inauguration to unite the country. "There were times in our history that we were divided against each other we looked at each other with suspicion. In these sixteen years of democracy, we have worked together to limit the effects of a divided society, of a society that separated us," Bachelet said. "This is the moment in which we feel united."

Editorial commentary typically viewed her ascent as a positive step in Chile's recovery from the earlier autocratic regime. Colombian daily El Tiempo editors wrote that Chileans were meeting each other again through Bachelet's leadership. "[Bachelet] symbolizes, in an exceptional manner, the other face of that dictatorship," they wrote, suggesting that her return represented a recovery of civil government and closed the Chilean transition to democracy. Her actions "are all a symbol of the long distance Chileans have covered to re-establish institutions and coexistence between the inhabitants [of the country], just as respect for human rights is guaranteed."

As an agnostic, Bachelet was not actually sworn in as president but she promised to uphold the nation's laws. Her first action after taking office was to visit the tomb of her father at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Santiago, 32 years and one day after his death. She named one of her father's cellmates, Raul Vergara Meneses, to serve as deputy defense minister for the Air Force.

In the 1980s, while in exile in Nicaragua, Meneses served as a commander in the Sandinista Air Force. Gender parity in Cabinet, but not in regional governors Bachelet vowed to maintain gender parity in her appointments, a process made more difficult by her need to balance political concerns among her coalition partners. The Defense and Economy Ministries were among the key posts

Bachelet gave to women. Bachelet also named a woman as her chief of staff. "This Cabinet is in line with the major challenges we have ahead," she said.

Aggressive efforts to name women to high positions in prior governments helped advance the political careers of figures like Bachelet and Soledad Alvear, her former competitor in the presidential race and head of the Foreign Relations Ministry under Lagos. The PS was savoring its new opportunities with Bachelet as chief executive while the Partido por la Democracia (PPD) and the Partido Radical Social Democrata (PRSD) also made significant gains in the officialdom.

Members of the Partido Demócrata Cristiana (PDC), a centrist member of the Concertación coalition, expressed some dissatisfaction with Bachelet's intended appointments, and there were rumblings within the party about the value of continuing in the coalition when its composition in official positions increasingly favors the more left-leaning parties. The complaints may have paid off as PDC members were the most numerous among the Cabinet and the appointments to regional governor positions. "These are people with considerable intellectual, professional, and political prestige," she said of the 10 men and 10 women in her Cabinet, a first for the number of women appointed to the Cabinet.

The Finance Ministry will be headed by Andres Velasco, an independent, fiscally conservative US-educated economist. He is expected to continue the economic policies of the outgoing government, which maintained a sizable fiscal surplus and kept inflation firmly under control.

The following is a list of her Cabinet ministers:

Minister of the Interior: Andres Zaldivar (PDC)

Minister of Foreign Relations: Alejandro Foxley (PDC)

Minister of Finance: Andres Velasco (independent, but closely linked with the PRSD)

Minister of the Presidency (General Secretary): Paulina Veloso (PS)

Minister of Government (General Secretary): Ricardo Lagos Weber (PPD)

Minister of Defense: Vivianne Blanlot (PPD)

Minister of Education: Martin Zilic (PDC)

Minister of Justice: Isidro Solis (PRSD)

Minister of Economy, Development, and Reconstruction: Ingrid Antonijevic (PPD)

Minister of Labor and Social Security: Osvaldo Andrade (PS)

Minister of Public Works: Eduardo Bitran (PPD)

Minister of Planning and Cooperation: Clarisa Hardy (PS)

Minister of Transportation and Telecommunications: Sergio Espejo (PDC)

Minister of Health: Maria Soledad Barria (PS)

Minister of Housing and Urban Development: Patricia Poblete (PDC)

Minister of National Goods: Romy Schmidt (PPD)

Minister of Agriculture: Alvaro Rojas (PDC) \* Minister of Mining: Karen Poniachik (independent)

Director of the National Service of Women: Laura Albornoz (PDC)

National Council of Culture and Arts: Paulina Urrutia (independent)

There are seven representatives from the PDC, five from the PPD, four from the PS, one from the PRSD, and three independents, although Velasco is closely associated with the PRSD but does not officially belong to the party. Bachelet also is asking the legislature to create two new ministries for public security and the environment.

Reporters noted that her appointments to regional governorships did not meet her "total parity" goal, with 17 women and 34 men filling the 51 posts. The governors administer various districts within the country's 12 regions and the metropolitan area of Santiago. Questioned on the 2-to-1 male-to-female ratio in the governors' positions, Bachelet said, "We are trying to make the most parity possible." She added, "We opted to close the book without having such a strict exigency" as a requirement for total parity would have been, "but never in the history of any of the three Concertacion governments have there been 17 women governors." Twenty governorships went to the PDC, 12 to the PS, 11 to the PPD, and eight to the PRSD.

## ***Bolivian President Morales attends, seeks better ties, ocean deal***

Some of the international leaders present at Bachelet's inauguration included Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, Uruguay's President Tabare Vazquez, Argentina's President Nestor Kirchner, Paraguay's President Nicanor Duarte, Spain's Prince Felipe, and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Rice described US-Chile relations "as the example of the relationship we hope to have with the continent." The two countries have a free-trade deal in place (see NotiSur, 2003-06-13 and 2003-08-08), strong economic ties, and a more-or-less genial relationship between the moderate Chilean government and the right-wing US administration, even though Chile successfully opposed US efforts to legalize its invasion of Iraq at the UN (see NotiSur, 2003-03-14 and NotiCen, 2003-03-27). The most interesting leader among those attending

the inauguration, at least for observers of regional affairs, was Bolivia's newly elected President Evo Morales.

Morales enjoys a historic electoral mandate (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06) and seeks to resolve Bolivia's 126-year-old demand for access to the Pacific Ocean. Lagos and Bachelet have been open to strengthening diplomatic ties with Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23, 2005-07-29), although Bolivia's demands for ocean access are a non-negotiable point of patriotic pride for its mass movements, while Chile's willingness to cede land or change its interpretation of prior treaties is doubtful.

Bolivian officials have said they would be open to selling energy to Chile in exchange for access to the sea. But energy-poor Chile has refused to cede any territory to Bolivia and the idea is generally unpopular among Chileans. Nonetheless, meetings between Morales and Bachelet have created some optimism among those who watch the bilateral relations of the two countries.

Political analyst Guillermo Holzmann, director for political studies at the Universidad de Chile, said recent gestures between the two countries signaled that Morales and Bachelet could repair diplomatic ties that were broken off in 1978 after years of negotiations failed to resolve Bolivia's demand for access to the Pacific Ocean. The two countries maintain consulates but not embassies in each other's territory. Bachelet seeks to restart full diplomatic contact. "Obviously, Evo Morales' visit and the events related to it signal the greater rapprochement of recent months," said Holzmann.

### *First policy act: free health-care access for seniors*

On March 13, Bachelet announced that there would be free access to public hospitals for seniors over the age of 60, the first policy announcement she made after assuming office. She said the move reflected her priorities of broadening social protections by better distributing the fruits of Chile's strong economic development. "We hope that, in our country, development will be more harmonious all the time for every one of its inhabitants." It was not immediately clear whether the plan would be restricted to emergency cases. Further details were to be announced later, and some local news media reported that it would probably extend only to people registered with the state insurance system. According the last national census in 2002, 1.7 million of Chile's 16 million people are older than 60.

In her first full working day, Bachelet announced plans to increase the lowest pensions received by Chileans and to grant government pensions to elderly citizens who lack an income and to those who cannot work because of physical problems. She said the level of pension benefits would depend on the funds available, which the Finance Ministry is studying. Bachelet, who is considered somewhat more left leaning than Lagos, said that she aims to implement "a nationwide social-protection network" by the end of her four-year term. She said she had appointed Mario Marcel, a socialist economist and former budget director, to head a commission to reform Chile's pioneer private social-security system. No details have been available on the changes she plans to the system, implemented in the early 1980s under the Pinochet dictatorship (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11).

Bachelet began the day by visiting a nursery school in Maipu, a working-class Santiago suburb, saying she wanted to show her concern for children. "Inequities begin in the crib, when not all

children have the same opportunities," she said. "Because of this, I want to start my government with a clear signal that we want to promote conditions of equality for everybody." She promised to create 800 new state-funded nursery schools during her term to benefit 25,000 more young children.

The president also confirmed her plans to develop a foreign policy focusing on relations with Latin American countries and stressing efforts to increase regional integration. She said she would make brief visits to Argentina and Uruguay the week following her inauguration.

Bachelet also intends to expand Chile's already extensive international free-trade agreements (FTAs). Chile, which counts Asia as its biggest export market, is seeking closer trade ties in the region, according to outgoing Foreign Affairs Minister Ignacio Walker. In January, Walker said the government would study the feasibility of FTAs with Malaysia and Thailand and expects to start talks with Japan this month.

Chile is also increasing its ties with Singapore, New Zealand, and Brunei, and has existing trade agreements with China, India, and South Korea, he said. "We're very comfortable with this new neighborhood we've discovered," Walker said in Singapore. "We have a small market and there's much to gain from opening to the world economy." Asia, home to the fast-growing economies of China and India, buys 36% of the goods that Chile ships overseas, Walker said. The Americas account for 35% of the nation's exports and Europe 26%. Walker didn't say how much the new accords might increase trade. Chile's trade with South Korea surged 72% in the year after the signing of an FTA in 2002, he said. Chile's economy is expected to grow at least 6% in 2006, faster than the government forecast in the year's budget, as consumption and investment increase, said Lagos shortly after Bachelet's electoral win.

The country, the world's biggest copper producer, will continue to benefit from exports of the metal this year, said Lagos. Along with the overall fiscal conservatism of the Lagos administration, Bachelet's government will continue to pursue political reforms to the system laid down at the end of the Pinochet regime. Lagos' administration and the Congress managed to modify several articles of the Constitution (see NotiSur, 2003-06-27, 2004-10-22, 2005-08-19), but the binomial electoral system to name representatives a system that critics say gives disproportionate power to opposition parties and excludes minority parties remains enshrined in law. Bachelet hopes to end the binomial system, a move RN legislators intend to resist.

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