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Bachelet Shuffles Three Cabinet Ministers

by LADB Staff

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Four months into her term, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet has replaced three ministers in her Cabinet. Facing a steep drop in popularity numbers and accusations that her Cabinet was inexperienced and improvising its policies excessively, Bachelet removed her ministers of the interior, economy and education on July 14.

Student protests oust education minister

Possibly the most foreseeable of the three replacements was the removal of Education Minister Martin Zilic, who found himself at the center of a political storm as nationwide student protests brought the country's education system to a halt (see NotiSur, 2006-06-23) shortly after taking office. The protests shut down Chile's school system in May and June as almost one million students took to the streets to demand greater federal support for education, forcing Zilic and the president to make US\$200 million in concessions to student demands. The resulting chaos and street violence that were a part of the largest student protests in 30 years immediately tainted Zilic's image among much of the Chilean public.

Yasna Provoste, who was planning minister in the final months of former President Ricardo Lagos' (2002-2006) administration, was named to replace Zilic. In the Interior Ministry, whose head also serves as the political chief of the Cabinet, Belisario Velasco replaced Andres Zaldivar. Velasco was previously a deputy interior minister in the first civilian government after the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Alejandro Ferreiro replaced Economy Minister Ingrid Antonijevic.

"We have a new challenge," Bachelet said. "We are entering a new phase in which the central task is to complete the changes we have outlined - achieving a democracy with greater participation by the year 2010, with a consolidated social protection system."

Christian Democrats take one more seat in Cabinet

The move maintained the gender parity Bachelet had said would be a part of her cabinet, while it increased the presence of Democracia Cristiana (DC) party members by one. All three of the replacement ministers were Christian Democrats, while outgoing Antonijevic was a member of the Partido Por la Democracia (PPD). The DC and PPD are important elements in the Concertacion coalition that has held power since 1990.

Some DC members complained about Zaldivar's removal while Antonijevic complained that the leftist PPD had not given her adequate support during her brief tenure. Placating the parties in Concertacion has been an important part of the balancing act Bachelet had to conduct while naming her ministers. Since she was inaugurated as president on March 11 (see NotiSur, 2006-03-17),

Bachelet has faced a number of political problems, the most prominent of which were the student strikes. There has also been a growing outcry from the public and opposition figures on the right about crime rates.

In response, Bachelet has said she will set up a Ministry of Public Security. Flooding in southern Chile killed over a dozen people in July, adding to a negative image of government competence. Popularity drop Bachelet is still popular among survey respondents, but she has seen a sudden drop in popularity in her first 100-plus days in office.

A mid-June survey newspaper La Tercera showed a drop of 11 points, leaving her with a 56% approval rating. The poll between June 13 and 15 surveyed 1,011 people and had a margin of error of 3.1%. Another poll by the company Adimark showed a 7-point drop among 1,013 respondents. The poll had a 3-point margin of error. In the days before his dismissal, Zaldivar asserted that there was a "sustained campaign" by the right to discredit Bachelet's administration, "but I think that has no importance. Cabinet changes are not made by polls." A June 18 poll by newspaper El Mercurio and the firm Opina had shown 60.6% of respondents favored changes in the Cabinet. Another by La Tercera had 74% calling for a change in ministers.

Bachelet has said her administration will be self-critical and she will make changes based on how effective her staff is in implementing her "four great transformations" in Chilean government. She seeks to improve education, innovation and enterprise, improve quality of life in Chile's cities, and the system that provides the country's social services.

Bachelet also seeks to replace the so-called "binomial system" that allows parties that lose elections to hold undue power, and suppresses smaller parties (see NotiSur, 2003-06-27, 2004-10-22, 2005-08-19 and 2005-12-16) with a system of proportional representation. She argues that she has completed 36 of the reform measures she promised to complete in her first 100 days in office, although some are only unimplemented legal projects at this point. Since the student protests pried funding from the state, other groups like teachers' unions are jockeying to get a slice of the expanding pie made of increased revenues from the state-owned copper company, CODELCO (see NotiSur, 2006-02-24).

Copper prices have shot way up, putting plenty of money in the Treasury. But the Bachelet administration is following an austerity policy that would save most of its copper bonanza for a rainy fiscal day, says Guillermo Holzmann, a political scientist at the University of Chile. "A lot of people don't understand why, with this increase, they don't see more income in their pockets," he said. In Chile, 19% of the population is still poor, according to government statistics, with 4.7% earning less than US\$40 a month, too little to afford basic nutrition.

Juan Ite, a driver at CODELCO's Andina mine, says his nation should spend more of its wealth. "If we have a bonanza now, you should be able to see it with more hospitals, more schools, higher pensions," Ite, 39, said, swinging his dirt-streaked truck alongside a pile of rock rich in copper. "The poor can't wait." Juan Chavarria, who manages US\$183 million in stocks and bonds at mutual fund company Bandedarrollo Administradora de Fondos, agrees with the truck driver. "I don't think it's

reasonable to have it all invested for bad days ahead," he said. "For some people, the bad days are now."

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