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Chile: President Bachelet Shuffles Cabinet After Protests Against Transit System

by LADB Staff
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Chile's President Michelle Bachelet has faced a significant decline in popularity and protests regarding the capital city's strained transit system, forcing her to reshuffle her Cabinet in late March. She has also sent a legislative package to the Chilean parliament in an effort to reform the national educational system, the focal point of large-scale protests last year.

New education law signed a year after student protests
Earlier protests regarding the national education system forced Bachelet to shuffle her Cabinet in the middle of 2006 (see NotiSur, 2006-06-23 and 2006-07-28). The week of April 10 about one year after the start of the large-scale student rebellion Bachelet approved a new education law to replace the one that ex-dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) set up in 1990 at the end of his reign. She is now seeking congressional approval for her reforms to the Ley Organica Constitucional de Ensenanza (LOCE).

The proposals include guaranteeing free education from early childhood through the fourth year of high school. It also establishes quality standards, prohibits any discrimination against students, and eliminates up to the eighth grade a selection process that includes requirements for students to matriculate and requirements to have high grades.

The legal reforms also would prohibit educational institutions from profit-making activities. A national education council, formed by participants in the educational system, will approve the content of educational materials. And a superintendency will oversee quality control and end profit-making in schools. "Things could have been done better, but I think we can continue working, continue conversing for an improvement in education," said student Maximiliamo Mellado, one of the leaders of last year's "rebellion of the penguins," referring to the appearance of the protesting students' uniforms.

Student spokesperson Maria Jesus Sanhueza said the reform showed that "the effort we made during the year was effective." Student leaders said they would analyze the proposal and later decide whether to renew the protests, depending on their support for the project. The May and June 2006 protests forced Bachelet to authorize US$200 million in scholarships and food benefits, among other concessions.

Bachelet's popularity wanes over Transantiago failures
Even with the student movement apparently mollified for the time being, transit chaos forced Bachelet to make new, big changes to her administration. Bachelet swore in six new government ministers March 27, her second Cabinet shuffle in a year, after service disruptions in a new public-transit system in Santiago damaged her approval rating.
The president asked four ministers to resign the day before, including Sergio Espejo, the transportation and telecommunications minister, amid mounting pressure from Santiago residents who have seen commute times double because of a shortage of buses and subways. Bachelet also created a new Cabinet post and divided the duties of another. "This is a new stage for this government," the president said during a ceremony at the presidential palace in Santiago broadcast on national television. "Each of you has hanging over you the enormous responsibility of accompanying me in fulfilling goals to make Chile a country with faster growth, one that is more prosperous and modern, with greater justice and more social protection."

The Cabinet changes were widely anticipated as even some government supporters had been critical of Transantiago, the government's plan to integrate the bus and subway system, which was supposed to provide relief from the city's antiquated subway and bus service. Since Transantiago was introduced Feb. 10, people have been walking long distances to catch buses and fighting large crowds for trains. One person died of a heart attack in the subway crush.

Bachelet blamed private companies contracted to provide bus service. She said the public contracts called for 5,600 buses in the streets at peak hours but the actual figure never reached 5,000. Experts also attribute Transantiago's failures to a flawed design and deficiencies in the city's infrastructure. "There don't appear to be any short-term solutions," said Eugenio Guzman, director of the School of Government at Adolfo Ibaez University in Santiago. "The problem is the failure to anticipate what was coming, on both a political and technical level." Bachelet's approval rating fell to its lowest level since she took office last March, according to a March 24 La Tercera survey, after commuters faced block-long lines at bus stops and suffocating crowds on trains following the introduction of Transantiago.

The president's approval rating fell to 45%, compared with 51% in a survey published March 4, La Tercera said. The survey by the newspaper polled 690 people, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points. Her approval ratings topped 65% when she took power a year ago.

Bachelet's disapproval rating also jumped to its highest since she took office. In March, the president's disapproval climbed 7.6 percentage points from the previous month to 40.1%, according to a poll by Adimark Gfk. The survey of 1,016 people across the country was taken between March 7 and March 27, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Bachelet had pledged to improve routes and ensure that enough buses were on the streets to reduce travel times and overcrowding, especially in Santiago's low-income neighborhoods. "I feel close to and moved by those who suffer, for those with more needs," she said. "That's why what has happened recently, which has affected the poorest people in our country more strongly, has hurt me profoundly."

Transantiago was supposed to improve the quality of life in the sprawling city of more than 6 million, not worsen it. Behind the effort was a push to make Santiago a world-class city befitting the economic growth of the past decade that has made Chile a model for development among financial analysts. The project, costing more than US$1 billion in public and private funds, involved purchasing more than 5,000 buses, revising routes, integrating subway and bus services, and
using electronic swipe cards to pay fares. The new buses would burn cleaner fuel, officials vowed, improving the capital's severe air-pollution problem. And the revised routes would ultimately be more efficient.

**Cabinet ministries created, altered**

In the latest Cabinet remake, Bachelet created an Environment Ministry and split the Energy and Mining Ministry into two ministries. The president tapped Rene Cortazar Sanz to take over the Transportation and Telecommunications Ministry. Jose Goni Carrasco took over the Defense Ministry from Vivianne Blanlot, while Jose Antonio Viera-Gallo Quesney became the new minister of the presidency, succeeding Paulina Veloso. Carlos Maldonado Curti is the new justice minister, replacing Isidro Solis Palma.

Bachelet named Marcelo Tokman, who has a Ph.D. in economics from the University of California at Berkeley and has worked in the Finance Ministry since 1997, to take charge of the new Energy Ministry. Chile is facing a third year of reduced natural-gas shipments from neighboring Argentina, which supplies almost all its natural-gas imports (see NotiSur, 2004-04-30).

Ana Lya Uriarte Rodriguez took charge of the new Environment Ministry. The conservative press has mercilessly attacked Bachelet, standard-bearer of the center-left Concertacion coalition that has ruled Chile since democracy was restored in 1990. One tabloid put the president on its cover with a dunce cap and the headline "Transanfiasco."

Speculation has already arisen that the debacle could help catapult the right into power when Bachelet's term ends in three years. Adding to Bachelet's political difficulties have been ongoing corruption allegations, involving a state sports agency, which first emerged late 2006. About US $800,000 in government funds appears to have been diverted from sports programs to the political campaigns of candidates of the Concertacion coalition during previous governments. Bachelet has promised that her own government will be "as transparent as an aquarium."

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