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Chile's Senate has removed a member of the president's Cabinet for the first time in almost four decades. The Senate forced the resignation of Education Minister Yasna Provoste in April over a scandal that found private schools abusing government subsidies. The ouster of Provoste came months after President Michelle Bachelet had reshuffled her Cabinet in January.

Provoste barred from public office for five years

On April 16, Senators voted to remove Provoste for failing to prevent the scandal over subsidies to private schools that overstated enrollment. The Senate vote also barred Provoste from public office for five years. The lower house of the legislature had already suspended Provoste and she lost the Senate motion of confidence by one vote, resulting in her impeachment.

Appointed by Bachelet in July 2006, Provoste is the first cabinet-level minister to be dismissed by lawmakers since democracy was restored in 1990 after the 17-year dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). The Ministry of Education has been a major focal point of controversy during Bachelet's administration. Mass student protests demanding increased government support for the education system forced Provoste's predecessor, Martin Zilic, to resign in July 2006, just a few months after Bachelet's inauguration (see NotiSur, 2006-07-28).

Provoste was not accused of any wrongdoing, but opposition legislators said she should be held accountable for the alleged mishandling of billions of pesos of government funds allocated to private schools. An investigation by the General Comptroller's office showed that steep subsidies were paid to schools that overstated the number of their students. The probe, still in progress, involves some 260 billion pesos (about US$580 million).

Bachelet's administration and allied lawmakers in her Concertacion coalition called the ouster politically motivated, and said the irregularities were merely accounting mistakes that are being clarified. The president accused the opposition of wanting to "make a show of political force," and said, "I hope this will not set a bad precedent." Concertacion spokesperson Sen. Jose Antonio Gomez called the impeachment a "civic death" caused by mere "minor presumptions or situations that have not been proven."

But Sen. Jovino Novoa of the conservative opposition party Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI) said Provoste "was informed of the serious situation that was occurring in her ministry and failed for several months to take action." In the Chamber of Deputies, German Becker, a representative of the Renovación Nacional (RN) party which along with the UDI makes up part of the Alianza por Chile opposition coalition, encouraged the Senate to remove Provoste on April 15.
"The Chamber of Deputies hopes that each of the senators, when they give the votes, condemn the deeds and assume the obligation that we have before millions of Chileans to give a signal of condemnation and repudiation before the accounts [of corruption]. It cannot be understood that all these extremely grave charges might not have anyone responsible for them," said Becker.

Provoste, a descendant of Aymara Indians claimed she was being persecuted for being "small, dark-skinned, middle-class and indigenous." She is the first Chilean minister to be impeached in 36 years, and it comes as Bachelet's approval ratings continue to slump.

The BBC's correspondent in Santiago, Gideon Long, said that Provoste, as a young, female minister with indigenous roots, represented exactly the kind of face the president wanted to promote when her government took office two years ago, But the government was beaten in the Senate by the votes of a handful of rebels-or, in the words of Concertacion loyalists, "traitors" who had recently defected, giving the opposition a parliamentary majority.

The BBC's Long argued that the ouster marked a new low for the Bachelet government and that the main concern for Bachelet was that the rebels will do the same in future votes, making her a lame duck president for her remaining two years in power.

Cabinet reshuffle maintains ruling coalition balance

Bachelet's Concertacion coalition brings together a rather wide spectrum of leftists, socialists, center-left party members and Christian Democrats, making the process of maintaining consensus a difficult one for Chile's current president. In January, Bachelet shuffled her Cabinet in such a way that would maintain a balance among the four parties that make up the Concertacion coalition.

On Jan. 8 she swore in six new Cabinet ministers in a shake-up she said was needed for "the second stage" of her government. The main change in the 22-member Cabinet was the appointment of veteran leader Edmundo Perez Yoma of the Partido Democrata Cristiano de Chile (PDC) as interior minister, the top political post in the Cabinet. Perez Yoma is a former defense minister who played a key role in the 1990s in ensuring a smooth departure of Pinochet from the post of army commander, a post he had retained after stepping down from the presidency.

Bachelet also replaced the ministers of economy, public works, mining, agriculture and planning. The changes, according to The Associated Press, were not expected to herald major changes in government policy. In swearing in the new ministers, Bachelet said they "will have the mandate to put all their capacities and energies at the service of the nation's development and the goals of progress set by our government."

Bachelet, who took office in March 2006, said the first stage of her government so far "has been difficult but the balance is a positive one." Earlier, she said in a speech anticipating the Cabinet shuffle that "we are about to enter the second stage." A year ago, Bachelet made significant changes to her Cabinet after protests over inadequacies in the transit system in Santiago (see NotiSur, 2007-04-13).
**Renewed student protest**

Provoste's replacement, Monica Jimenez de la Jara, almost immediately faced renewed student protests later in April. Some 500 students were arrested after a series of protests in Chile's principal cities as students called for opposition to the new general law on education and for free passage for students on public transit.

The main protests took place in Santiago, where federal police arrested more than 200 students demonstrating near the law school of the Universidad de Chile and at the Museo de Bellas Artes. The protestors were part of a gathering of about 1,500 high school and university students. In Valdivia, in the nation's south, about 150 were arrested. Students and law enforcement reportedly faced off in a half-dozen other cities. The students said the national education system "is living through a very grave crisis." One of the criticisms by the student movement is that schools established in wealthier municipalities enjoy better allocations than schools in poorer areas. The student leaders also allege that the new national education law seeks to privatize education and say that the reforms did not resolve the demands of the so-called "revolution of the penguins," named after the uniforms of the students.

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