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Municipal Elections in Chile Show Governing Concertacion Losing Strength

by Guest

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Chile's center-left Concertacion may finally be losing its magic touch. In last month's municipal elections the governing coalition which has dominated Chilean politics for the past two decades suffered what is widely considered its first "defeat," losing to the conservative Alianza partnership. It now faces an even bigger challenge in the Alianza's Sebastian Pinera, a wealthy businessman and former senator who enjoys early front-runner status ahead of next year's presidential contest.

The Alianza, representing the conservative Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and Pinera's center-right Renovación Nacional (RN), won 40.5% of votes cast in the Oct. 26 mayoral contests, edging out the Concertacion (38.4%) for the first time ever. The four-party governing coalition still holds a slight advantage in overall mayorships: 146 to the Alianza's 142. That lead is tiny, however, compared to the 203-104 advantage it enjoyed after the last municipal elections, in 2004.

The Concertacion will now have mayors in just two of the country's 15 regional capitals, down from eight after the 2004 elections. The Alianza, in contrast, saw its control of regional capitals rise from five to nine.

The UDI's Pablo Zalaquett won the country's biggest prize, Santiago Centro, with a clear victory over Jaime Ravinet of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC). The conservative opposition also won in Iquique (Region I), Valparaíso (Region V), Rancagua (Region VI), Talca (Region VII), Concepción (Region VIII), Temuco (Region IX), Valdivia (Region XIV), and Coyhaique (Region XI).

"The losers were the Concertacion and the [President Michelle] Bachelet administration. And the relative winner was the Alianza," said political analyst Oscar Godoy of the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP). "Compared to the 2004 elections, the Concertacion won fewer votes, fewer mayorships, and fewer city council positions. All of this shows that the coalition is in decline." The Concertacion did manage to draw more city council votes than the opposition, outpolling the Alianza 44.4% to 35.9%.

Given its overall problems, however, the result did little to dissuade Chile's major media outlets from dubbing the elections a major loss for the governing coalition. "From a strictly electoral standpoint, there was a real shift to the right," said Tomas Hirsch, a former and likely future presidential candidate for the far-left Juntos Podemos Mas coalition. "The Concertacion suffered a

major defeat that was a bit sanitized, smoothed over by its win on the city council level, which in the grand scheme of things has absolutely no political relevance."

Concertacion weaker after two decades in power

First formed in 1988 during Chile's transition to democracy, the Concertacion which ties together the DC, the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), the Partido Socialista (PS), and the Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD) has won four consecutive presidential elections and, until this year, dominated at the municipal level as well. Its most recent victory came in 2006, when Michelle Bachelet replaced the still very popular Ricardo Lagos to become Chile's first female president.

Enthusiasm for her historic win quickly subsided, however, in the face of massive student protests. Bachelet then pushed forward with a disastrously implemented and still widely hated overhaul of Santiago's public-transportation system. Slowed economic growth, rising inflation, and a series of corruption scandals have further eroded support for the coalition, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, is also struggling with growing internal divisions.

In late 2006, veteran Concertacion member Fernando Flores resigned from the PPD and went on to form a new party called ChilePrimero (CH1). Months later, a nasty dispute erupted within the DC, which ended up expelling one of its traditional stalwarts, Adolfo "Colorin" Zaldívar. By forging an alliance between subsequent DC defectors and the conservative opposition, the newly independent Zaldívar went on to win the Senate presidency and now controls an influential swing vote.

The new factions enjoyed a successful coming-out party in last month's municipal elections, when CH1 joined forces allied with Zaldívar's "Colorines," the new Partido Ecologista de Chile, and other independents under the banner Chile Limpio. The hastily formed coalition surprised observers by winning 4% of Chile's mayoral races and 7.5% of city council positions. "There is a dismembering taking place within the Concertacion, a weakening," said political scientist Ena Von Baer of the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez. "In the electoral sense, it may still be a majority in Chile, but certainly not in the overwhelming way it was before."

"The municipal elections show that the Chilean political system is finally becoming really competitive," she added. "Before 1999, that wasn't the case. The Concertacion always won. Starting in 1999 things got more competitive in the presidential races. And now that's taking place on the municipal level as well." Stalwarts leaving the coalition In the three weeks since the election, things have hardly improved for the struggling Concertacion.

On Oct. 28 just two days after the historic loss President Bachelet's health minister, a close ally, resigned amid news reports that a hospital in the north had failed to notify some 25 people diagnosed with HIV. Two days later, Sen. Soledad Alvear of the beleaguered DC quit as party president and announced she would not be a candidate in next year's presidential elections. Alvear, who served as foreign affairs minister under President Lagos, had been considered one of the Concertacion's strongest presidential possibilities.

Then, on Nov. 6, the Concertacion received yet another blow when outspoken leftist Sen. Alejandro Navarro announced he would leave the PS to establish a new party the Movimiento Amplio

Socialista (MAS) and launch an independent presidential bid. "A phenomenon is taking place involving the renegades on the left. Senator Navarro, who's the most important representative of this segment, is a good example," said Oscar Godoy.

"The renegades vehemently desire that their own coalition lose the presidential elections because it's the only way they can free themselves from the restraints that prevent them from developing a more radical left-wing movement allied with [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chavez, [Ecuadoran President Rafael] Correa, and others." "I'm increasingly certain that the Concertacion will lose the next election and that, in doing so, it will collapse," he added. "Once it loses, it will fall apart."

The growing factionalism does little to boost the coalition's chances of winning a fifth-straight presidency, especially given Pinera's soaring poll numbers and his lack at least for the time being of any legitimate intra-Alianza challengers.

The Concertacion, in contrast, has yet to decide anything other than that it will hold an open primary next May. But who exactly will participate in that primary remains very much to be seen. Several big names have been mentioned as possibilities: former Presidents Lagos and Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle as well as former interior minister Jose Miguel Insulza, who currently heads the Organization of American States (OAS). \

Still, nothing is yet set in stone. "It's clear that, on the right, Sebastian Pinera's future is looking bright. And I don't think that the UDI is in a condition to promote its own candidate," said Hirsh, who pulled in 5.4% of the vote in the 2005 election. "In terms of the Concertacion, Soledad Alvear has now ceased to be a favorite. I think the DC, which is now left with just Frei, will have a difficult time winning the nomination. Either way, there'll be a long fight ahead."

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