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LADB Staff

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Tycoon Steamrolls Divided Left in Chile's First-Round Presidential Contest

by LADB Staff

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Chile's Dec. 13 presidential election was at once historical and predictable, as opposition leader Sebastian Pinera, a front-runner throughout the campaign, finished well ahead of his three leftist rivals to become the first conservative winner in more than half a century. Pinera, a wealthy businessman and former senator who hails from the center-right Renovacion Nacional (RN) party, grabbed 44% of the vote, significantly ahead of Demócrata Cristiano (DC) candidate Eduardo Frei's 30% but shy of the 50% needed to win the presidency outright. Instead, he must now face Frei, a senator and former president (1994-2000), in a head-to-head runoff scheduled for Jan. 17.

Frei represents the governing center-left Concertacion coalition, which ties together the DC, the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Socialista (PS), and Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD). Pinera heads Chile's other principal coalition, the Alianza, which includes the hard-right Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI), many of whose leading figures began their political careers during the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

If Pinera maintains his momentum and polls suggest that is likely he will become the first elected conservative to lead Chile since former President Jorge Alessandri (1958-1964). A poll released by the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporanea on Dec. 9, four days before the election, had Pinera beating Frei by a definitive 49% to 32% in the second round. Such an outcome would end 20 years of Concertacion rule. Formed during the final years of the Pinochet dictatorship, the coalition has won every presidential election since 1989.

Challenged on two sides

The Concertacion's most recent victor, President Michelle Bachelet, is enjoying sky-high popularity as she prepares to leave office, fueling speculation she might try for a second term in the 2013 elections. Chile's Constitution allows presidents to return to office but bars them from serving back-to-back periods.

Bachelet's 77% approval rating, however, has failed to rub off on Frei, despite her repeated endorsements of the DC candidate. Many analysts agree that Frei was simply a poor choice for the Concertacion, an aging coalition that because of its long tenure in power is struggling to convince voters of its continued relevance. As a candidate, Bachelet an agnostic divorcee and the country's first serious female contender was certainly something new for Chile.

Frei, a 67-year-old political veteran who left office in 2000 with a less-than-stellar 28% approval rating, is not. The "change" mantle has instead been taken up by rivals Pinera a graying veteran in his own right but one that at least hails from a different political persuasion and Marco Enriquez-Ominami, a PS dissident who, despite failing in his bid to leapfrog Frei into the second round,

positioned himself front and center on Chile's political map by mounting a serious challenge to the country's two-coalition hegemony. A 36-year-old rookie deputy, Enriquez-Ominami is the biological son of slain revolutionary Miguel Enriquez and stepson of former PS Sen. Carlos Ominami.

Sharing the opinion that the Concertacion erred in its choice of candidates, Enriquez-Ominami, or MEO as he's been dubbed by the press, resigned from the PS to mount an independent campaign. The decision earned him heavy criticism from many former Concertacion colleagues, who saw the ambitious congressman as sabotaging Frei's chances.

A growing number of Chileans felt otherwise, eventually awarding him with more than 20% of the votes cast in the election. Although not enough to earn passage to the second round, the more than 1.3 million votes he received could nevertheless be a sign of good things to come for the rising political star.

"Having been a candidate myself, I know how difficult it is to reach double digits in a place like Chile, where the power is so concentrated [in two coalitions]," 2005 presidential contender Tomas Hirsch of the Partido Humanista told NotiSur. "This was clearly a blow to the duopoly that we've had here until now. It represents the arrival of a third social-political force." Pinera promises a "heavy hand"

For Pinera and his supporters, a long-awaited victory for the right-wing Alianza is finally in sight. During a massive campaign rally on Dec. 10, Pinera the 701st-richest person on the planet according to Forbes magazine offered a virtual eulogy for the Concertacion, praising the center-left coalition for its accomplishments but insisting it's "done," "out of material," and trying to hold on to power for power's sake.

In a speech that had all the trappings of a victory address, the Alianza leader also shared his signature law-and-order message, promising a heavy-handed approach to fighting crime. "We need to crack down on crime and drug dealing and return to our families and children the right to live in peace and without fear," he said to thunderous applause. "Tonight I want to warn the criminals and drug dealers that the party's over. They're going to face a heavy-handed president who'll pursue them with all the force in the world and apply the full weight of the law."

Although critics are quick to point out that Chile already has the highest incarceration rate in the region and, as a result, a grossly overcrowded prison system (see NotiSur, 2009-09-25), Pinera's anti-crime message seems to resonate with voters from both sides of the proverbial tracks. "I'm a taxi driver, and I'm just sick of all the crime," said Jonathan Fuentes, one of thousands who attended Pinera's Dec. 9 campaign finale in downtown Santiago. "We have to struggle to get a license to operate. That's why I'm sick of the crime and the drugs. That's why I want Sebastian to be president."

A sprint to the finish line

Still, with roughly a month to go before the runoff, Pinera's victory is hardly a done deal. Frei, Enriquez-Ominami, and Jorge Arrate, the fourth-place finisher who represents the far-left Juntos Podemos Mas coalition, together captured 55.9% of the vote, theoretically enough to keep the right

out of power again. Arrate, who drew 6.2% of the vote, has already promised to support Frei. What's unclear, however, is what will happen to all the votes that went MEO's way. Analysts say that, if Pinera can attract at least a third of Enriquez-Ominami's supporters, he'll win the presidency. Otherwise Frei may squeeze out one more Concertacion victory.

"Pinera, the candidate of the conservative world and of the right, would be a historic setback for Chile," Enriquez-Ominami told reporters election night. But the flashy young deputy also had some choice words for Frei, whom he refuses to endorse. "They don't represent change. Sebastian Pinera and Eduardo Frei are too alike....There's nothing to negotiate. If you want to capture the votes of people for voted for us, listen to their demands."

Also yet to be seen is how or if recent revelations about the death of former President Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970), the Concertacion candidate's father, could sway voters. On Dec. 7, Judge Alejandro Madrid dropped a bombshell revelation by declaring Frei Montalva's death a homicide and filing charges against six men allegedly involved in the assassination.

The announcement confirmed long-held suspicions that Frei Montalva did not die of complications from a late-1981 hernia operation but was instead slowly poisoned to death by Pinochet agents. The timing of the announcement less than a week before the election certainly raised some eyebrows, especially as it came just one day after Frei unveiled his long-awaited human rights agenda. That same day President Bachelet joined thousands during a funeral ceremony for Victor Jara, a second for the famed Chilean activist and folk singer who was tortured and killed in the days following the 1973 military coup. Jara's body was exhumed recently as part of an ongoing investigation into his death (see NotiSur, 2003-09-12, 2009-06-19).

As it has for the past two decades, the Concertacion continues to sell itself as a champion for human rights, a relatively easy task considering the undeniable links that exist between some members of the Alianza and Pinochet's 17-year military regime. The sudden revelation that Frei, by virtue of his father's assassination, was also a victim of the dictatorship certainly helps to hammer that message home.

On Dec. 9, one day after Judge Madrid made his announcement, Frei visited his father's grave flanked by family members and a who's who of Concertacion stalwarts. "Anyone who in one way or another is sending a subliminal message that the timing of this ruling is strange should be embarrassed," said Justice Minister Carlos Maldonado. "A good judge does what Judge Madrid did announce a ruling once he's reached a decision, independent of whatever circumstance might be present at that moment."

The announcement left Pinera with no other option but to express his "solidarity" with the Frei family and promise, should he be elected president, to continue supporting the investigation. Whether the burst of attention being paid to the Frei Montalva murder case will be enough to put his son back in contention remains very much to be seen. Frei's disappointing 30% finish in the election suggests it may not. In this, the first presidential contest since Pinochet's death (see NotiSur, 2007-01-05) on International Human Rights Day, Dec. 10, 2006, the Concertacion may need to offer more to voters than yet another reminder of its historic opposition to the dictatorship.

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