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Chile: Sebastian Pinera Takes Helm Of Quake-rattled Nation

by LADB Staff
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Two decades of leadership by the center-left Concertacion coalition came to an official end March 11, when Sebastian Pinera, a conservative billionaire businessman and onetime senator, donned Chile's presidential sash for the first time in what turned out to be literally an earth-shaking event. Just minutes before the start of the ceremony, held in the Congress building in Valparaiso, a series of powerful tremors rippled through central Chile, putting a natural exclamation point on a transfer of power already loaded with historic significance. Not only did Pinera's inauguration swing the country to the right for the first time since the end of the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), it also came less than two weeks after Chile suffered its worst natural disaster in half a century: a magnitude 8.8 earthquake that struck Feb. 27 (see NotiSur, 2010-03-12).

"Certainly nobody predicted, much less wanted, this government to begin in such tragic and adverse circumstances," Pinera said in his inaugural speech, delivered, as tradition dictates, from a balcony in Santiago's La Moneda presidential palace. "But this situation, far from breaking or weakening us, makes us stronger and united. If before we said we’d do things well, today we'll have to do them even better. If before we said we'd work with a sense of urgency, now we work with a sense of pressure. If before we said we would be close to the people, today I tell you we will make your hardships and hopes our own." Quake shifts already changing political landscape

The quake, one of the largest in recorded history, affected a huge swath of central and southern Chile, killing some 500 people and causing an estimated US$30 billion in damage. It also left its mark on the country's already shifting political landscape, altering the balance of power and upending the new president's priorities. Pinera narrowly won Chile's Jan. 17 presidential election on promises he would snuff out crime, end government corruption, improve healthcare and education, and create a million jobs (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22). All of that now takes a back seat as the president and his conservative Cabinet, dubbed the reconstruction government, confront the more pressing task of lifting a broken and battered Chile back on its feet. The government, which has already promised the unusual step of modifying the 2010 budget, said it will ease environmental and building rules to facilitate reconstruction and modify the tax structure to encourage private donations. But while the catastrophe certainly presents Pinera with a monumental challenge, it also provides a unique political opportunity, say observers. For starters, according to Jose Jara, director of the Chile branch of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), the disaster gives the president some breathing room when it comes to his own lofty goals. "The government can modify its agenda," said Jara. "$\text{[Pinera]}$ will have excuses not to follow through on his priorities. He said he’d create a million jobs, that he was concerned about the environment. All that now gets pushed to the background." The devastating earthquake also gives the new president what until recently seemed an unlikely chance of making good on his promise of unified leadership. In his first speech after beating Concertacion candidate, senator, and former President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), Pinera announced a "second transition" for Chile. The first transition from dictatorship to democracy was steered initially by President Patricio Alwyn (1990-1994) of the Democrata Cristiano (DC), who was praised for bridging the gaping political divide left by Pinochet's heavy-handed military
regime. It was in the spirit of Alwyin, Pinera explained when naming his Cabinet last month, that he chose veteran Concertacion member Jaime Ravinet as his defense minister (see NotiSur, 2010-02-19). The gesture did little to ease tensions with the center-left coalition, fresh off its first-ever presidential defeat. Political fault lines were still clearly visible even in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. The rightist mayor of hard-hit Concepcion, Jacqueline van Rysselberge, lashed out at the soon-to-be-departing administration, claiming it was "embarrassingly" slow to react. Conservatives also criticized outgoing President Michelle Bachelet for shutting Pinera out of the government's immediate response. One week after the quake, however, Chileans of all political stripes rallied around a telethon that raised some US$60 million and sparked a nationwide surge of flag-waving enthusiasm under the slogan "Fuerza Chile." Both Pinera and Bachelet appeared on the nationally televised event, where they shared a much-publicized hug. Earlier that day, Pinera met with the heads of the Concertacion's four member parties the DC, Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Socialista (PS), and Partido Radical Social Democrata (PRSD) who agreed on a "truce" and promised to back the new president's reconstruction efforts. "When Pinera won the runoff, his message was focused on national unity, asking for the Concertacion's cooperation," said Carolina Apablaza, an analyst with Libertad y Desarrollo, a conservative think tank that provided many of the new president's key Cabinet members. "But the Concertacion said 'no'....Today those same people are saying that, because of the earthquake, we need a unified country." Conservatives offer new look, new attitude The temporary truce does not mean, however, that the rightward political shift is not a significant one in both substance and style. The week before Pinera's inauguration, the incoming administration unveiled a new government logo. The new design resurrects Chile's traditional seal, which features the slogan "por la razon o la fuerza" (either by reason or force). The motto fell out of fashion during the Concertacion's 20-year tenure and no doubt still sends a chill down the spines of the tens of thousands of Chileans detained or tortured or whose family members were assassinated or disappeared during Pinochet's 17-year regime. Pinera's religious convictions highlight another aspect of the ideological shift now taking place in government. Bachelet is a self-professed agnostic, long separated from the father of her children. The 60-year-old Pinera, in contrast, is a regular churchgoer who, like every single member of his Cabinet, is married. "I'm not alone in this challenge," Pinera said in his inaugural address. "I'm accompanied by a brave, generous, and vigorous people, by a team of excellent Cabinet members committed to and passionate about public service, by a wife and wonderful family, and, certainly, by the watchful gaze and guidance of God....Above all we need faith, in our people and in God, who has always guided us along the right path." Bachelet bows out with record support How the Concertacion reacts to the governmental sea change remains very much to be seen. Even before the earthquake, the coalition was showing serious signs of wear and tear. Growing internal divisions stretched to a breaking point in the recent presidential election, when the coalition's standard bearer, Frei, competed not only against Pinera but against two Concertacion dissidents as well Jorge Arrate and Marco Enriquez-Ominami (see NotiSur, 2009-12-18). The earthquake only adds to the coalition's woes as it puts the Concertacion at least for now in something of a political straightjacket. "Today, whoever says they're not for national unity will pay a political price," said FLACSO's Jara. "It's unfortunate that it's come about as a result of an earthquake, but really the disaster has left Pinera in a very good position." Still, the Concertacion continues to have at least one major ace up its sleeve: ex-President Bachelet herself. Hailed as the Teflon president, Bachelet, who made history four years ago when she became Chile's first female head of state (see NotiSur, 2006-03-17), weathering a student uprising in 2006, heavy criticism the next year for a poorly implemented overhaul of Santiago's public-transportation system, the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, and, most recently,
her own coalition's electoral defeat, to leave office with a record approval rating of 84%. "Her level of support is like nothing the country's seen before, especially given that [her coalition] lost the election. It's a strange thing," said Apablaza. "During her first two or three years in office, she was poorly evaluated, especially because of the Transantiago [public-transportation] problem. But she made a second opportunity for herself with the economic crisis. Under the guidance of [Finance Minister] Andres Velasco, she made decisions that turned out to be correct....Her policies, especially in social protection, were very important for Chileans." Prevented from running in this past election because of Chile's term-limit laws, Bachelet should she choose to will be eligible to compete in the 2013 contest, something her many supporters are already lobbying hard for. On March 11, Bachelet's last day in office, hundreds gathered early in front of La Moneda to bid the outgoing president farewell. Many, though not all, were women who said they were personally touched by Bachelet's four years in office. "She stuck her neck out for all the women of our country," said Magaly Sansano, a retiree. "She did an excellent job. A woman who overcame her past, her sadness. She was tortured along with her mother. Emotionally, she flipped a switch in our country. She was a very intelligent woman, classy, caring, I'm so thankful to her. I hope she comes back in four years."

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