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Chile: With First State Of Nation Speech, President Sebastián Piñera Positions Himself Front And Center

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Just over two months after taking office, President Sebastián Piñera delivered his inaugural state of the nation speech on May 21. But rather than shock or even rile his opponents in the Concertación, the center-left opposition coalition, the new president presented a laundry list of plans and promises that simply stole their thunder. Pledging to eliminate extreme poverty by the end of his term in 2014 and help Chile reach "developed" status within a decade, Piñera, Chile's first conservative leader since former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), presented an ambitious seven-point agenda focused on growth, employment, crime fighting, improvements to education and health care, poverty reduction, and strengthening democratic institutions. Calling for "national unity," Piñera praised his four predecessors Concertación Presidents Patricio Alwyin (1990-1994), Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), and Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) for their "patriotism, loyalty, and honor." He then promised action on a long list of items that were backed but never passed by those same Concertación leaders. The conservative president drew rousing applause by committing, for example, to reduce health care costs for the elderly. He promised a guaranteed "ethical income" of US$463 per month for families of five (Chile's minimum monthly salary is currently US$305) and said he would create a special social-development ministry focused on raising people out of poverty. Borrowing liberally from the Concertación playbook, Piñera, a billionaire businessman and one-time senator for the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN), also vowed to extend voting rights to Chilean nationals living abroad, facilitate the voter-registration process, and no longer make voting mandatory for those who do register. The president said, in addition, that he would do away with the "absurd separation of male and female voting stations" and finally lift a ban on political gatherings on or just before election day. "We must come together as a large family to overcome these times of pain and sadness," Piñera said in reference to the magnitude 8.8 earthquake that walloped central Chile Feb. 27, just two weeks before his inauguration (see NotiSur, 2010-03-12). "There are no paths toward unity. Unity is the path...In their shared commitment to the well-being of all Chileans, the president and Congress are allies, not rivals." Throwing the opposition for a loop considering the time it took Piñera's conservative Alianza coalition to finally wrest control of the government from the Concertación, it is not surprising that the political right applauded the speech even if in the past they opposed many of those same ideas. The Alianza ties together the RN and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), whose historically rocky relationship has improved significantly as a result of their long-awaited victory at the polls. Top government spokesperson Ena Von Baer called the speech "powerful," while veteran RN Sen. Andrés Allamand, a longtime collaborator and at times Piñera rival, said it "showed a new way of governing and is the change for which Chileans voted in the last election." Piñera beat the Concertación candidate, Sen. and former President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), 51% to 48% in a tight Jan. 17 runoff that put an end to the center-left coalition's 20-year run in power (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22). Frei hails from the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), the most centrist party in the Concertación, which also includes the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Socialista (PS), and Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD). If the Alianza's job right now is to back the president,
the Concertación's is presumably to raise objections. But given the progressive content of Piñera's speech, punching holes in his program is proving easier said than done for the coalition. While some nitpicked the president for being too general or too ambitious, others came across as downright wistful. "I would have liked it if in recent years many of the proposals and initiatives had been made in such a clear, direct, and categorical way by our government," said DC head Juan Carlos Latorre. "I think eventually that would have garnered attention and won over people who were waiting a long time for us to worry about these types of problems." Dr. Marco Moreno, a political-science professor with the Universidad Central, said Piñera's speech was both tactical and effective. Without majorities in either house of Congress, the president has to move toward the political center, he explained. But in doing so, the president not only surprised but in many ways neutralized the Concertación opposition. "The speech threw the current opposition for a loop because obviously it trumped some of their historical cards, those that have to do with social protection. Those were the cards the opposition wanted to play against the Piñera government," Moreno told NotiSur. "It made the Concertación, which was already having difficulties positioning itself as an opposition force, all the more disoriented." Kicking them while they're down Even before losing the presidency, the Concertación was showing serious signs of wear and tear. During the two years leading up to the election, several high-profile lawmakers resigned from the coalition. One of those dissidents, then deputy Marco Enríquez-Ominami (formerly of the PS), went on to make a serious run for the presidency, challenging Frei on the left and eventually earning 20% of the vote in last December's first-round general election (NotiSur, 2009-12-18). The 37-year-old Enríquez-Ominami, or MEO as he is known in the press, has since gone on to form his own party, the Partido Progresista (PRO). As MEO struggles to remain politically relevant, the four Concertación parties are undergoing a painstaking restructuring process. Observers argue that only after the dust has settled from the parties' respective internal elections will the Concertación finally be in a position to begin working again as a political unit. "Members of the Concertación say they don't yet know how to manage as the opposition. But I think that learning process is really a secondary issue," said Óscar Godoy, a political science professor at Chile's Pontificia Universidad Católica (PUC). "The main thing is that the parties in the Concertación have to reform. That's the process they're in right now. They have to elect new directorates. There has to be new leadership. Only after that's completed can they really go about putting together what could be a new Concertación." Whether it's unfamiliarity with the opposition role or more serious structural flaws, the Concertación's current woes certainly help Piñera, whose success upon taking office March 11 was hardly guaranteed. His popular predecessor, Michelle Bachelet, left office with a nearly 90% approval rating clearly a tough act to follow. The deadly earthquake that struck just before his inauguration did not make his task any easier. For now, however, the president has reason to feel confident. The speech seems to have given him a boost, as have higher-than-expected economic-growth figures (the Banco Central is now predicting 4.5% expansion in the coming months), excitement at Chile's pending participation in the soccer World Cup, and a general sense that the country is recovering well from the February quake, the largest to hit Chile in half a century. "It was a very skillful speech. He managed to put his goals on the table, to position and re-establish his agenda, which had been sidelined by the earthquake and by the transition process. The speech was intelligently constructed," said Moreno. "It was also very unexpected and caught people on both sides of the political aisle off guard."

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