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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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President Sebastián Piñera Promises New Approach to Age-Old Mapuche Quandary

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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First-year President Sebastián Piñera is promising a fresh start to a festering problem that long perplexed his leftist predecessors and continues to percolate in Chile’s southern Araucanía region. There, historic tensions between the state and marginalized Mapuches, the country’s largest indigenous group, have turned increasingly violent in recent years.

This time last year, then President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) of the center-left Concertación coalition had her hands full trying to quell a surge of violent confrontations between Mapuche activists and carabineros, Chile’s uniformed police. The dangerous cat-and-mouse game took a tragic turn in August, when a carabinero officer shot and killed 24-year-old Jaime Facundo Mendoza Collío during an operation to evict Mapuche activists from a seized Araucanía farm (see NotiSur, 2009-11-13). Mendoza was the second Mapuche to die at the hands of carabineros in as many years.

The crisis, erupting as it did in the home stretch of Bachelet’s presidency, raised serious questions about the Concertación’s handling of the Mapuche issue.

The four-party coalition, which governed Chile for two decades before losing the presidency earlier this year (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22), employed what observers describe as a classic stick-and-carrot approach with the Mapuche community. Through its Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (CONADI), the Concertación sought to meet Mapuche territorial demands with modest land allocations. At the same time, authorities employed a zero-tolerance approach to periodic Mapuche land occupations and/or arson attacks, responding with heavy police repression and using, in some cases, a dictatorship-era Anti-Terrorism Law that is routinely criticized by international rights groups.

Responsibility for the Mapuche “conflict” now falls on the shoulders of Piñera, Chile’s first conservative leader since dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). A billionaire businessman with a pronounced law-and-order streak, Piñera doesn’t come across as the most likely of peacemakers. In his first state of the nation speech (see NotiSur, 2010-06-18), the new president failed to even mention the issue, raising serious doubts about his commitment to improving relations with the Mapuches.

Piñera did finally turn his attention to the matter late last month, however, taking advantage of a current lull in the violence to pledge his government’s good will toward the Mapuche and outline a strategy based more on "development" than "assistance." Above all, the new president is sending the message that, after 20 years of Concertación rule, his government is prepared to approach the issue with a clean slate.

"For our government, there is no indigenous problem," Piñera said during a June 24 indigenous-new-year celebration. "There is a group of people, or many groups of indigenous peoples, who are part of our country and deserve to have equal opportunities. Our government is committed to that."
**A business-first approach**

The president’s clean-slate approach includes once and for all modifying the Constitution to include language that recognizes "the contribution, identity, and culture of Chile’s indigenous." A proposal to do just that has been kicking around Congress since 2007. Piñera also promised to replace CONADI with what he is calling the Agencia Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (ANDI).

"The old one [CONADI] is showing signs of fatigue and needs to be renovated, just as the land, during this winter solstice, also needs renovation," said Piñera. He did not specify exactly how the two agencies would differ other than to say ANDI will be more participative.

The centerpiece of his approach, however, is what is being heralded as Plan Araucanía 7, a billion-dollar development scheme designed to stimulate the Araucanía as a whole and thus bring Mapuches into the national fold by providing jobs, improving infrastructure, and advancing educational opportunities. The number seven refers to the economic position Piñera hopes the Araucanía will eventually occupy among Chile’s 15 regions. Home to more than 30% of the country’s approximately 800,000 Mapuches, the Araucanía currently ranks last.

Piñera’s government is still hammering out the details of the plan, although the daily El Mercurio reports it will likely involve tax incentives for investors, widespread road building, and construction of both a freight port and massive reservoir. The "ambitious" plan, explained Sen. Alberto Espina, a member of Piñera’s center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) party, really is a departure from the Concertación approach as it relies "not just on assistance mechanisms, but rather on creating opportunities."

"The goal is that, within 10 years, the Araucanía will be among the five most developed regions in the country," Espina told reporters during a late June visit to the region. "It’s an ambitious goal and will require the participation of legislators from across the board, professional organizations, Mapuche communities, workers, universities, and the community as a whole."

The business-first approach has already earned some support from the Mapuche community. In a recent editorial, the online publication Mapuche Noticias explains how Piñera’s plan, which looks to raise living standards for the whole region, is far more inclusive than the narrowly targeted land-distribution projects of past governments.

Only about 30% of the Araucanía’s Mapuches (or 7% of the region’s total population of roughly 940,000) live in the countryside. The region’s other 870,000 residents, including tens of thousands of urban Mapuches, "don’t benefit at all from the distribution of ancestral lands to Mapuche communities," the Web site explained. Land distribution, furthermore, doesn’t in itself help marginalized Mapuches rise out of poverty, the editorial went on to say.

**Repression breeds resentment**

But for many Mapuche groups and their sympathizers, no government project—whether it promises land, symbolic recognition, or better jobs and education—will resolve the age-old conflict as long as the state continues to repress suspected activists, the indigenous communities who allegedly harbor them, and even journalists who try to share those communities’ stories.
uring the administration of President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), Chilean authorities began using Ley 19.029—known as the Anti-Terrorism law—to prosecute Mapuche activists suspected of property attacks. The "harshest" of all Chilean statutes, according to the organization Human Rights Watch (HRW), the law doubles sentences and provides prosecutors with a number of special privileges by allowing, for example, testimony from hooded witnesses.

A relic of the Pinochet dictatorship, the law was originally used to crack down on armed political groups involved in kidnappings, attacks on police stations, and assassinations. Its use to prosecute alleged arsonists has drawn criticism not only from rights groups like HRW and Amnesty International (AI) but also from the UN.

Early in her presidency, President Bachelet—herself a onetime political prisoner and later exile—promised not to apply Ley 19.029. Last February, however, that promise was broken with the arrest and prosecution of Miguel Tapia Huenulef, a suspected "terrorist" who—more than a year later—remains in preventative custody awaiting trial for his alleged role in a January 2009 arson attack. When police ransacked his Santiago residence last year, they claimed to have found a stash of weapons. Tapia Huenulef’s family insists the evidence was planted (Notisur, 09-03-13.)

Since then Anti-Terror Law prosecutions have piled up. Last month, the group Comisión Ética Contra la Tortura (CECT) reported that currently 57 Mapuches have either been convicted or are currently being prosecuted under Ley 19.029. The controversial law, the organization claims, uses the logic of the "internal enemy" to deny defendants basic due-process rights.

In their zeal to squash the Mapuche movement, Chilean authorities have also targeted journalists and academics, the CECT pointed out. A case in point is documentary filmmaker Elena Varela. Police arrested Varela in May 2008 and charged her with "illegal association with intent to commit an offense" regarding a 2004 bank robbery. This past April, after numerous court appearances and periodic detentions, an Araucanía court finally acquitted her.

Some Mapuches prosecuted under the Anti-Terrorism Law are eventually acquitted—but only after the suspects spend months and months in jail. "Our boys are suffering... Many have already been locked up for 15 months, and that's a lot," Juana Reiman, a member of a Mapuche community in Lumaco and a relative of a Mapuche prisoner, told the Camara de Diputados’ Human Rights Commission in late June.

Reiman found a sympathetic ear in commission president Deputy Hugo Gutiérrez of the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), who promised to present a motion before the full legislature to stop using the Anti-Terror law against Mapuches. Gutiérrez, a well-known human rights attorney, is one of just three PCCh lawmakers in the Camara de Diputados. Sworn in this past March, Gutiérrez, Guillermo Tellier, and Lautaro Carmona are the first PCCh members to hold congressional seats since Chile’s 1973 military coup.

"They have made it very clear that no Mapuche is given provisional freedom. Instead, they are always held in prison pending trial, a situation that can extend a long time. We consider this to be a very serious claim they're making," Gutiérrez said after listening to testimony from Reiman and others.

It’s doubtful, however, that Gutiérrez will have much luck in convincing the rest of the legislature to make that modification, especially since President Piñera is on record as supporting application of the Anti-Terrorism Law.
Piñera insists the people responsible for carrying out violent acts of protest are "a small minority." He may be right. But he would be wrong to assume that minority, despite the current lull in activity, will not make its presence felt again. He would also do well to keep in mind that, even if the people carrying out those actions are relatively few, their sentiments are shared by many. Furthermore, Mapuche solidarity only grows stronger in the face of evident repression, impunity for police officers who have killed indigenous activists, and the discriminatory application of a law that is only used against Mapuches.

"We’re open to dialogue, but the state doesn’t want to recognize us as a distinct nation and it criminalizes our demands," said Mapuche leader Víctor Queipul during a June 24 seminar in Santiago. "They want to dismantle our fight. A state official who killed [a Mapuche activist] should be charged and locked up. It’s been a year of impunity for the death of Jaime Mendoza. But the government doesn’t investigate or punish anyone. For us, we get locked up on accusations of making threats."

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