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Chilean President Sebastián Piñera Faces Major Leadership Test as Student Protests Pound Away at His Popularity

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At some point during the past several months, President Sebastián Piñera, a billionaire businessman who until recently had also enjoyed a winning record in politics, lost his Midas touch. Now it seems he may be losing control.

The second-year president’s deep sophomore slump sunk to new depths earlier this month when tens of thousands of Chileans joined together in a , banging pots and pans in a deafening clamor of popular dissent. A sign of general frustration with Piñera’s government, the spontaneous and highly symbolic Aug. 4 protest followed hours of clashes between student protestors and heavily armed carabineros (uniformed police), who choked the streets of Santiago with tear gas and made nearly 900 arrests.

Many observers described the heavy police deployment in downtown Santiago as a "state of siege" reminiscent of the dark days of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). The cacophonous kitchenware protest that followed left many Chileans with a sense of déjà vu as well. The large-scale was widely described as Chile’s first since the days of the dictatorship.

"In the 1980s, there were also clashes in the streets. Like now, barricades appeared all over the place, and there was police and military repression. In that context, people used kitchen pots as a way to protest the use of repressive force," historian Gabriel Salazar told the news service Terra. "I think for a lot of people it was very emotional to see a repeat of this type of protest."

A winter of discontent

For Piñera, the events of the day played out like a perfect storm, one that had been building for months. In late May, national uproar at his government’s decision to approve a controversial hydroelectric project in the far south gave way to protests by secondary and university students demanding improvements to Chile’s underfunded, poor quality, and yet often costly schools.

Students are demanding more state control of the system, which was decentralized during the Pinochet regime and is now run at the municipal level. Consequently, wealthy communities with more resources at their disposal are able to offer better-quality education than are poor communities, where classroom conditions are downright dismal in some cases. The students also object to the proliferation of private schools, particularly at the university level. The private schools, critics complain, are expensive, run in some cases as for-profit businesses, and notably inconsistent when it comes to quality.

"All education in Chile is organized around the logic of profit. This is the central issue," Universidad de Chile economics professor Marcel Claude explained in a recent interview with the Argentine newspaper Página 12. "The rich study in the best universities, and the poor in the worst conditions, which magnifies the inequalities that they were born with. The 40% of students that don’t finish
university end up in debt and without a diploma, while 60% of those who do finish can’t find work in their field."

During June, the protests grew in size and frequency, culminating in a massive June 30 demonstration in downtown Santiago that drew an estimated 200,000 people. What had begun as a series of school sit-ins and isolated demonstrations had developed into a full-blown national opposition movement.

First to try to negotiate a solution to the impasse was then Education Minister Joaquín Lavín, a leading figure in the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) who also happened to co-found the Universidad del Desarrollo (UDD), one of Chile’s most prestigious and successful private universities (NotiSur, July 22, 2011).

After Lavín’s efforts failed, President Piñera took his own crack at the issue, promising during a nationally televised address on July 5 to create a US$4 billion education fund. Piñera dubbed his plan the Gran Acuerdo Nacional por la Educación (GANE), which means "win," but also "earn." The student protestors rejected that overture as well.

His approval rating dipping to just over 30%, Piñera’s next move was to institute a major Cabinet shuffle. He gave Lavín’s education post to the Felipe Bulnes, the justice minister, moving Lavín to the Ministerio de Planificación. The president replaced his top spokesperson Ena von Baer with Andrés Chadwick, a UDI senator. Pablo Longueira, another UDI senator, is now minister of the economy. And Laurence Golborne, who had been heading both the mining and energy ministries, was transferred to the Ministerio de Obras Públicas.

Student protests continued, and on Aug. 1, Education Minister Bulnes extended the students a new offer. This time the government agreed to gradually "demunicipalize" the public-school system. The new deal also promised to codify the "right to quality education," in the Constitution.

Chile’s Constitution was drafted during the Pinochet regime. Since democracy was restored 21 years ago, it has been modified numerous times—but never replaced. Many in the student movement want the dictatorship-era document scrapped altogether.

**Enough is enough**

While the Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH) and other student groups involved in the movement mulled the new offer, the Piñera administration—hoping to end the conflict once and for all—drew a proverbial line in the sand. Wielding a Pinochet-era decree dating back to 1983, the government refused to authorize student demonstrations planned for Aug. 4 along Santiago’s main thoroughfare, the Alameda. The message being conveyed from on high was clear: "enough is enough."

"In the face of this wall of intransigence and obstruction, which has systemically prevented us from reaching agreements, our government is today making two promises," the president told reporters Aug. 3. "First, we will ensure law and order and protect the right of the vast majority of Chileans to live in peace." Piñera went on to say his government would "take all necessary measures so that those students who want to get on with their studies can."

Despite the president’s warning, thousands of student protestors descended the next morning on the center of Santiago, where they were met by a massive contingent of carabineros. Through clouds
of tear gas, the police—armed with water cannons, clubs, and shields—battled with students while sirens blared and police helicopters crisscrossed overhead.

Student leaders complained of widespread abuse by the carabineros. "The scene today seems very much like a state of siege," said CONFECH president Camila Vallejo. "As much as [the Piñera administration] talks about a ‘new way of governing,’ in reality this seems like a pretty old approach, a dictatorial one." Vallejo, a 22-year-old geography student, has emerged as the face of the current movement.

Government authorities fired back by saying the students have only themselves to blame. "They've always complained about police repression, but here the ones who are generating the repression are those who are ignoring the authorities and the state of law," said Santiago’s conservative Mayor Pablo Zalaquett, also a member of the UDI.

Chile’s governing Alianza coalition includes the UDI and President Piñera’s more moderate Renovación Nacional (RN). Its primary opposition is the four-party center-left Concertación coalition, which led Chile for 20 years prior to losing the 2010 presidential election (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010).

Battling for hearts and minds

While the Alianza’s two member parties are often at odds (the UDI slammed Piñera last week for presenting a bill to legalize same-sex civil unions), they have both rallied behind the president in his standoff with the student protestors. And Piñera continues to receive favorable press coverage from Chile’s major dailies—, , and , which all lean right.

Nevertheless, momentum—and overall public support—appear for now to be on the side of the students. Images of police rounding up teenage protestors did little to earn the president much public sympathy, especially given that the Aug. 4 unrest coincided with the release of an embarrassing set of new poll numbers.

The Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), widely considered the most prestigious of the various polling firms that operate in Chile, said that Piñera’s approval rating now stands at just 26%, making him the most unpopular president since the country’s return to democracy. Piñera’s opponent in the last election, former President Eduardo Frei of the centrist Demócrata Cristiano (DC), left office in 2000 with a 28% approval rating. The CEP poll also found that eight of 10 Chileans oppose for-profit education, something President Piñera publicly supports.

Yet as disappointing as the CEP numbers are for the struggling government, the Aug. 4 cacerolazo was in many ways an even more damning rebuke for Piñera. A poignant expression of public outrage, the highlighted Piñera’s failure to frame the education debate to his liking.

Since then, Piñera has been conspicuously silent on the education issue. The student protestors have not. On Aug. 6, demonstrators returned to the streets of Santiago. This time authorities allowed the protest to proceed. A much-larger demonstration took place on Aug. 9, when an estimated 150,000 protestors marched down the Alameda.

Parallel protests took place in other cities, including Valparaiso, where Chile’s Congress is headquartered. In Santiago, there were incidents of violence. (hooded troublemakers) flipped and burned a car. Government authorities accused student organizers of failing to control their own
movement. Student groups countered by saying at least some of the were police plants. An incident in Valparaiso, where one carabinero disguised as an encapuchado fled into the Congress building to escape angry students, suggests their claims have at least some validity.

Like on Aug. 4, the latest demonstrations ended with cacerolazos, which took place throughout the country. The students, who are now calling for a national referendum on the issue, say they'll accept nothing less than a government guarantee of free, quality education for all. More protests are scheduled for the coming days.

"The students showed that the force of their convictions remains intact," Mario Wiassbluth, head of the organization Educación 2020, told the news site El Mostrador. "But I’m worried about the scale of infiltrations, subversives, and repression. This doesn’t just undermine the peaceful demands of the students, it adds to growing polarization in the country."

-- End --