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After A Lull, Chile's Education Reform Movement Marches On

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Chile's student protestors are beginning to regroup following a tragic plane accident earlier this month that cost the powerful reform movement both momentum and a popular ally: beloved television personality Felipe Camiroaga. One of the country's biggest celebrities, Camiroaga died along with 20 others when the military plane they were traveling on crashed off the coast of Chile's Juan Fernández islands.

A national tragedy, the accident was heartbreaking for the country as a whole and a blow to the months-old student movement in particular. Not only did the protestors lose a high-profile supporter (Camiroaga had recently made statements on television backing the students) but they also lost the media spotlight, which had shone steadily on their movement in the days and weeks just prior to the plane crash.

Launched in May, the push for education reform began as a series of street protests and school occupations by students demanding the government increase school funding and improve quality in the country's classrooms. As the southern autumn turned to winter, the protests coalesced into a full-blown movement that has drawn support from teachers, labor unions, and the general public ([NotiSur, July 22, 2011](#)).

Widely hailed as Chile's most significant citizens' movement since the end of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), the protests have been both massive—with crowds well in excess of 100,000 on several occasions—and imaginative. In June, students participated in a "kissathon" one day and a group dance interpretation of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" another.

Emboldened by the large turnouts and by conservative President Sebastián Piñera's plummeting approval rating, leaders from Chile's Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH) have extended their demands to include an end to for-profit education. They are also calling on the central government to reassume control of Chile's primary and secondary schools, which Pinochet placed under municipal management, and guarantee free education for anyone who needs it.

"Nothing In Life Is Free"

Starting under Pinochet, Chile saw a proliferation of private, for-profit schools—a trend that has continued unchecked since the country's return to democracy. One notable example is the Universidad del Desarrollo (UDD), co-founded by two of Piñera's Cabinet ministers—Joaquín Lavín and Cristián Larroulet—who also held posts under the military government.

Critics say that, despite their high costs, the private schools are inconsistent when it comes to quality. Chile's public universities enjoy better academic reputations, but they, too, are expensive, as cuts in state funding have meant that schools like the top-ranked Universidad de Chile rely increasingly on tuition revenue. Overall, tuition costs in Chile are second only to the US among member countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),

according to a recent report. Student protestors complain that only the rich can properly afford higher education in Chile. Poor and middle-class students, in contrast, have the choice of either forgoing university or taking on debilitating debts.

President Piñera says he shares the protestors' concerns about costs and quality. He has responded to protestors by promising more state scholarships for deserving students and lower interest rates for student loans. His proposals have fallen far short, however, of meeting the students' demand for universal free education, which Piñera—a Harvard-educated businessman with a personal fortune estimated at more than US\$2 billion—simply opposes.

"We'd all like it if education, health care, and many other things were free for everyone, but at the end of the day, nothing in life is free. Someone has to pay," Piñera told reporters Aug. 11.

The conservative leader, Chile's first since Pinochet, enjoys implicit support from the country's principal dailies, which have followed the government's lead in painting the student protests as violent and out of control. Yet public opinion appears to be on the side of the students. By some accounts, as much as 80% of the public back the student demands.

Many analysts cite the numbers as evidence that Chile, for all its enviable macroeconomic growth stats, has failed in distributing its newfound wealth evenly.

"Even as negotiations move forward, the education movement will likely continue to mobilize because the crack through which citizen demands are starting to pour out is now open," wrote journalist Ignacio Vidaurrázaga in a recent essay published by the online portal El Mostrador. "People are demanding a plebiscite, a new Constitution, that Chile change its economic model. Things have multiplied way beyond the movement's original demands."

A teenage victim

As the grey Chilean winter dragged on, the student protestors kept up their pressure on the beleaguered Piñera administration, rejecting a series of government proposals and forcing the president to replace Education Minister Joaquín Lavín, whose ties to the private UDD made him a particularly obvious target for the student leaders. Piñera gave the job to Felipe Bulnes, a corporate lawyer who had been serving as the justice minister.

The Cabinet shuffle did little to prop up Piñera's flagging approval numbers. The Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) says that support for the president now stands at just 26%, making Piñera Chile's most unpopular leader since the return to democracy ([NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011](#)).

Nor did the personnel change do much to appease student organizers, who held a series of massive demonstrations throughout the month of August. Somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million people turned up Aug. 21 for a daylong family cultural event in Santiago's Parque O'Higgins. Three days later, the students joined forces with the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), Chile's largest labor union, for a two-day national strike.

The Aug. 24-25 strike didn't come close to paralyzing business or transportation, but it did involve several large demonstrations and result in violent clashes between protestors and carabineros (uniformed police), who made nearly 1,400 arrests during the two-day span. Sadly, the clashes also resulted in one death. Manuel Gutiérrez, 16, died on the night of Aug. 25 from a bullet wound in the chest. Witnesses blamed police. At first, carabineros vehemently denied any wrongdoing, refusing

to even investigate the matter. Evidence collected over the following days showed, however, that Gutiérrez was the victim of a police bullet.

Student organizers demanded Piñera sack his Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter, one of the president's most trusted advisors. The president has so far shielded the interior minister, but heads did roll among the ranks of the carabineros. After sacking several unit chiefs, the government finally beheaded the institution altogether, forcing the country's top police officer, Gen. Eduardo Gordon, to resign.

Gutiérrez's death also prompted Piñera to intervene personally in the student conflict. On Aug. 26, the president invited leaders of the education-reform movement to come "immediately" to the La Moneda presidential palace for talks to end the conflict.

"As the president of Chile, I call on everyone—students, parents, teachers, and [university] rectors—to begin negotiations right away in La Moneda and in the Congress, because you and I both know that this is what the vast majority of Chilean expect and demand of us," the president said.

A calm in the storm?

With momentum clearly on their side, however, the students suddenly butted up against something absolutely beyond their control: fate. The Juan Fernández plane crash, first reported on the afternoon of Sept. 2 (the very day Gen. Gordon resigned), immediately shifted the attention of the government, media, and the country as a whole away from education reform and onto the distant archipelago—some 600 km off Chile's Pacific coast—where rescue crews continue to search for bodies.

The next day, Sept. 3, the much-anticipated La Moneda meeting took place as scheduled—despite the tragedy. But reactions on both sides were subdued. Piñera later announced two days of official mourning. Student protestors did their part by backing off from plans they originally had to hold another massive demonstration in Santiago.

Now, however, there are signs that this month's lull in the tumultuous reform movement may soon come to an end. On Sept. 9, CONFECH responded to the government's latest proposals, saying they are willing to continue negotiations, but only if the Piñera administration agrees to a four-point list of conditions.

The students are asking that future negotiations be broadcast publicly, that the state guarantee a freeze on public funding of for-profit schools, that the winter university semester, scheduled to end Oct. 7, be extended, and that the administration withdraw the education-reform bills it has recently submitted to Congress.

Minister Bulnes answered CONFECH's letter six days later, announcing on Sept. 15 that the government is prepared to meet the first two conditions but not the others. Student leaders responded immediately by announcing a new round of demonstrations. The first is to take place Sept. 22.

"The conditions that we proposed to move forward with negotiations were based on common sense, very minimal, supported even by lawmakers [from the governing Alianza coalition]," said Francisco Figuero, vice president of the Federación de Estudiantes Universidad de Chile (FECH). "Nevertheless, the government has used all of its artillery to intimidate us."

The upcoming demonstrations will be a test for both sides. The government is no doubt hoping the student movement eventually runs out of energy, that the recent calm in the storm has taken the wind out of the protestors' sails for good. But the protestors have seen momentum ebb and flow before. It is not unreasonable, given their success during the past four months, to expect they can once again rev up their revolutionary engines.

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