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Dismal Approval Ratings For Both Of Chile’s Principal Coalitions

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Since last October’s improbable yet ultimately successful rescue of 33 miners in northern Chile (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2010), President Sebastián Piñera has had little else to celebrate--except maybe that the opposition Concertación coalition is faring just about as badly as he is.

The high-profile miner rescue pushed the then first-year president’s approval rating to a respectable 63%. His moment of glory, however, proved to be fleeting. By December, support for Piñera started heading south--first gradually, and then, following the kickoff in May of ongoing student protests, quite precipitously--bottoming out at 22%, according to a poll released in late September by the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporánea (CERC).

If the polls are to be believed, Piñera now has the dubious distinction of being Chile’s most unpopular president since democracy was restored in 1990. Fortunately for Piñera and his allies in the conservative Alianza coalition, misery has company. Also taking a beating in recent polls is the Alianza’s principal rival, the center-left Concertación.

A survey released earlier this month by the polling firm Adimark estimates support for the four-party coalition at just 17%. The CERC survey was a bit more generous with the once-dominant Concertación, though not by much. Only 28% of respondents thought the Concertación--had it held on to the presidency--would be doing a better job than the current administration.

Promises, promises

Formed in the waning years of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), the Concertación tied together the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC) and left-leaning Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD), and Partido Socialista (PS). After scoring a huge victory with a 1988 plebiscite that helped doom the dictatorship, the Concertación went on to win four successive presidencies before losing the 2010 election to Piñera (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010).

Conventional wisdom holds that the left-leaning coalition might have been able to derive some political advantage from the five-month-old education-reform movement, which has pummeled the conservative Piñera administration. Yet the Concertación, despite claiming to support the protesters, has so far been unable to tap into the movement’s boundless energy.

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Perhaps that is because, during its two decades in power, the Concertación did little to address what a vast majority if Chileans see as serious structural flaws in the country’s education system. Most Chileans don’t need Piñera and his Alianza allies to remind them that the system’s serious quality and cost problems existed long before Chile’s 2010 shift to the right.

"After 20 years, they spent and then lost their power," Axel Buchheister, a researcher with the conservative think tank Libertad y Desarrollo (LyD), wrote in a recent El Mostador opinion piece. "To get it back, [the Concertación] will have to rearm itself. But that’s not going to be easy when the first and basic question about the coalition is still pending: what does the Concertación believe in?"

The last few months have seen a string of mea culpas from Concertación figures admitting that, yes, the coalition’s four administrations should have done more to reform the education system and dismantle other structural legacies of Pinochet’s military regime. Perhaps the most glaring example is the Constitution, which the Pinochet regime drafted in 1980. During its two decades in power, the Concertación amended the document on several occasions, but never replaced it.

The coalition now insists that the period of self-critique is passed. On Oct. 5, the anniversary of the 1988 plebiscite, leaders of the Concertación’s four member parties made a calculated show of unity in presenting a new manifesto of sorts. Entitled Nuestro Compromiso (Our Commitment), the document promises a new era for the Concertación, which claims it is ready to once again to be a vanguard for change.

"Just as we did on Oct. 5, 1988, when we began to close the sad chapter of the dictatorship and travel down the path toward democracy, today, 23 years later, we want to usher in a new cycle, one that’s marked by a commitment to change Chile in order to ensure that democracy, justice, equality, and respect for each and every Chilean are the foundations of our development," the document reads.

**Coming apart at the seams?**

Yet for all its fanfare, Nuestro Compromiso could prove to be a tough sell. Chileans might be forgiven if they have difficulty reconciling this vision of revival with the by-now-more-familiar image of the Concertación as a much-diminished collection of former rebels lacking a real cause.

"Historically, [the Concertación] was formed to oppose the continuation of the military government not to create a body of common policies and ideas. What’s more, [the different parties] overlooked their differences to accomplish their original goal. In the end, they bonded against something, not for something," wrote Buchheister.

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During the administration of President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), the Concertación saw a number of key lawmakers split off from the coalition. Sen. Adolfo Zaldívar, a veteran member of the centrist DC party, was expelled from the party in 2007 for insubordination. Soon after, he was elected president of the Senate--thanks to support from the political right.
In 2008, Sen. Alejandro Navarro broke off from the coalition in the opposite direction, resigning from the PS to found a tiny far-left faction called the Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS). And, in the lead-up to the 2010 election, rookie Deputy Marco Enríquez-Ominami--or MEO as he’s often referred to in the press--also broke ties with the PS (NotiSur, June 26, 2009).

MEO went on to run for president as an independent, mounting a serious left-wing challenge to the Concertación candidate, ex-President Eduardo Frei (1996-2000) of the DC. Just 36 years old at the time, Enriquez-Ominami finished third in the election with a surprising 20% of the vote.

Some political analysts have been predicting the imminent demise of the Concertación for several years now. One scenario has the DC splitting off to ally itself with Piñera’s center-right Renovación Nacional (RN). That would leave the RN’s partner in the Alianza, the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), to fend for itself.

Another possibility raised in recent weeks by PPD head Carolina Tohá, a senator and former Cabinet minister under Bachelet, would be for the Concertación’s three leftist parties--the PPD, PRSD, and PS--to form a single leftist entity. Theoretically, the new bloc might also be able to incorporate not only the traditional far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) and Partido Humanista (PH), but also independent groups like Navarro’s MAS and the Partido Progresista de Chile (PRO), a party MEO began last year.

**Don’t forget about Bachelet**

How all this plays out in the next presidential election remains very much an open question. Given how low support is right now for both Piñera and the Concertación, it stands to reason that the next presidential election--in 2014--could see the emergence of an independent or "third-way" candidate. In many ways, MEO already opened the door for that possibility in the past election.

This year’s massive student demonstrations raise some interesting questions as well (NotiSur, July 22, 2011, and Sept. 23, 2011). In Chile’s court of public opinion, the education-reform movement has succeeded where Piñera and the Concertación are clearly failing. Recent polls suggest that upwards of 70% of Chileans support the student effort. More than 87% of the nearly 1.5 million Chileans who voted in an unofficial plebiscite (Oct. 6-7) backed student demands for universal free education and an end to for-profit schools. So far, neither of the country’s two traditional voting blocs has been able to channel that energy. But that does not mean the movement’s momentum could not eventually rub off on someone else.

For now, that hypothetical figure--or third force--has yet to present itself. The student movement does already have has its own leaders, most notably Giorgio Jackson and Camila Vallejo. The
charismatic Vallejo has garnered international attention and set herself up for a real future in politics. But she is also just 23. Jackson is younger still.

Given his surprising success in the 2010 election, MEO--the son of famed 1970s revolutionary Miguel Enríquez--might want to make another presidential push. But for now, at least, the former deputy is hardly the political protagonist he was two years ago.

Another leftist long shot is Sen. Navarro, who dropped out late in the last presidential race but has since scored a number of political victories at the expense of the Piñera administration. A self-appointed watchdog, Navarro went public with information earlier this year that cost both Jacqueline Rysselbergh, a regional governor and Piñera appointee, and Magdalena Matte, the housing minister at the time, their jobs (NotiSur, May 13, 2011).

But there is one reason why all this talk of third parties and independent candidates may yet be a bit premature: Michelle Bachelet. The former president, who is living and working in the US as the head of UN Women, left office in 2010 to a virtual standing ovation. And, despite being very much a Concertación insider, Bachelet remains, interestingly enough, unscathed by her coalition’s woes.

"The Bachelet 'phenomenon' is related to the crisis of the Concertación, whose parties are weakened and are lacking fresh leaders. Right now she’s far from the country and its [political] players, so she stands apart," wrote CERC director Carlos Huneeus in a recent essay.

While Bachelet has made no overt indication that she would seek to regain the presidency, polls suggest she could--and quite easily. If she does run, the Concertación’s member parties will have a real incentive to bury their differences--for now at least. Winning, however, would be one thing. Keeping the tattered coalition whole while at the same time appeasing the students group and other citizens demanding major structural reforms would be another matter entirely.