After Eight Months, Chile’s Rowdy Education Reform Movement Goes Quiet

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Chile’s warm southern summer has brought an end—for now at least—to the relentless sequence of student-led protests that dominated headlines for much of 2011, cost two education ministers their jobs, and sank President Sebastián Piñera’s approval rating.

In downtown Santiago, police intervened on Dec. 22 to break up what would be the tumultuous year’s final education-reform march, arresting a handful of students and using tear gas and water cannons to disperse the other 1,000-4,000 participants—a modest turnout by the movement’s own standards.

The year’s final protest coincided with a decision by student leaders to end their months-long occupations of several emblematic buildings, including the Universidad de Chile’s Casa Central in Santiago, which had served as a key center of operations for the movement. On Dec. 21 students also lifted their toma (occupation) of the Santiago-based Instituto Nacional, the country’s oldest and most prestigious public grade school.

The sudden lull in protest activity is good news for the conservative Piñera government, on which the eight-month-old education-reform movement has taken a hefty political toll. At its peak during the winter months of June, July, and August, the movement staged protests involving in some cases several hundred thousand demonstrators (NotiSur, July 22, 2011). Since then, however, the movement’s momentum has clearly waned.

Student leaders say they are taking the summer "off" to reorganize and plan strategy for the coming year. The movement, in other words, is not over—just on pause until the next school year begins in March. "This doesn’t mean that the student movement is finished," Gabriel Boric, the recently elected head of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), told reporters on Dec. 21. "There are still many issues pending. The demands that we have made as a student movement were not achieved this year."

But whether Boric and the other student leaders will be able to rekindle the revolutionary fire of 2011, which saw the country’s largest demonstrations since the end of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), remains to be seen. Some observers say it is unlikely—that students will not want to sacrifice another academic year to a cause with such an uncertain outcome.

"At the end of the day, it seems that the student movement was in some ways defeated—it sort of fizzled out—and the government didn’t really hand over very much," Robert Funk, a political scientist at the Universidad de Chile, told Bloomberg.

Opting for all or nothing

In concrete concessions, the movement’s gains were indeed modest. The students’ core demands continue to be that the government do away with for-profit education and guarantee cost-free
education for all Chileans. Privatization and neglect of the public schools, they argue, have left Chile with a profoundly unequal education system that offers quality schooling only to those families who can afford it—or are willing to take on crippling debts.

Refusing to consider such deep structural reforms, the Piñera administration instead extended several offers to provide more money for scholarships, guarantee student loans, and lower student-loan interest rates. "Nothing in life is free. Someone has to pay," Piñera, a businessman with a personal fortune of some US$2 billion, said in August. The wealthy president insists Chile should have a "mixed" system, with private schools for those who can afford them and state subsidies for those who cannot.

Student leaders rejected the administration’s offers one by one, calling the proposals "more of the same" and sticking with their demands that what the Chilean education system really needs is an entirely new model. Protests continued, reaching a crescendo last August with a two-day national strike during which police shot and killed a teenage bystander (NotiSur, Sept. 23, 2011).

The death of 16-year-old Manuel Gutiérrez compelled President Piñera to call for direct negotiations with students. But, within weeks, talks broke down, prompting the administration to push through some minor reforms on its own. Two months later, the administration won a key victory when Congress, thanks to the votes of a handful of independent lawmakers, approved Piñera’s 2012 education budget against objections by the students.

The 2012 budget includes a modest 7.2% increase in education spending. The Piñera administration says the increase—from US$10.8 billion to US$12 billion—will nearly double the number of scholarships the government will grant. Last year the state awarded some 135,000 such scholarships. Critics point out that the budget increase is actually the lowest in recent years. The education budgets for 2008-2011 included increases of 24.5%, 15.4%, 15.5%, and 13.8%, respectively, according to Ministerio de Hacienda figures. "It’s a shame how [Congress] just jettisoned all the effort that the citizens have made during these seven months of demonstrations," Guillermo Petersen, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Concepción, told the daily El Mercurio.

The student reform movement took another hit in November when its most high-profile leader, Camila Vallejo, lost her bid to stay on as president of the FECH. The internal election went instead to Gabriel Boric, a fellow leftist. Vallejo, a charismatic geography student who has become something of an international celebrity during 2011, finished second and thus will continue to represent the FECH as vice president.

Vallejo’s disappointing election finish did little to dampen her own political prospects. Readers of Britain’s The Guardian recently voted her "person of the year." And a late-December poll by the prestigious Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) cited her as the country’s fourth-most-popular political figure behind former President Michelle Bachelet, Public Works Minister Laurence Golborne, and former finance minister Andrés Velasco. The FECH leadership change did, however, reflect poorly on the movement as a whole. Many observers sited it as evidence the student protestors have lost not only momentum but also cohesion.

**Battered on both sides**
The Piñera administration is no doubt relieved to see the protests finally subside. Yet it would be hard pressed to claim victory in the eight-month standoff—in part because the movement may well
catch fire again starting in March, but also because it continues to suffer the political costs of the protests.

Polls suggest a majority of Chileans still support the education-reform movement—70%, according to recent polls. That contrasts sharply with the meager 23% approval rating President Piñera registered in last month’s CEP survey. The CEP poll also found that 46% blame the government for failing to strike an accord with the movement, compared to just 22% who blame the students.

The movement has also prompted several Cabinet shuffles. Piñera’s original pick for education minister, Joaquín Lavín—a veteran of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI)—lost his post just two months after the protests began. Piñera reassigned the former Santiago mayor and two-time presidential candidate to the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, giving the top education job instead to then Justice Minister Felipe Bulnes. Six months later, Bulnes resigned from the Cabinet altogether.

On Dec. 29, Piñera replaced him with Harald Beyer, a technocrat and CEP researcher. The next day, a group of student leaders, including Camila Vallejo, presented the new education minister with a poster-sized letter and envelope outlining their demands. "Obviously we’re hoping that, with this card, which has really big letters, the new minister will be able to give a proper read to what are, what have been, and what will continue to be this social movement’s education demands," Vallejo told reporters.

Observers say the movement has left another important legacy as well: it punched a gaping hole in the free-market paradigm that has dominated Chile since the Pinochet dictatorship. Government leaders in the past were able to dismiss street demonstrators as representing special-interest groups or leftist minority factions. That’s harder to do in the face of events like the cultural gathering the students held Aug. 21 in Santiago’s Parque O’Higgins. By some estimates the event drew 800,000 people, a crowd that included not just students but teachers, workers, and entire families.

"For the first time in nearly 50 years, since the 1960s to be more precise, a generation of young people has emerged and put the political elite in check," the online publication El Mostrador argued in a Jan. 9 editorial. "They forced through a new agenda of public priorities and are going against the current in terms of the dominant values the culture uses to define success. Moreover, unlike the leaders of the 2006 pingüino movement, they haven’t let themselves be co-opted."

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