5-4-2012

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Opposition Infighting Ahead Of Chile’s Next Election Cycle

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 2012-05-04

Given the frequent political posturing that has already begun regarding who should be Chile’s next president, it is easy to forget that the country’s leader, President Sebastián Piñera, is just two years into his term.

At last count, Piñera’s approval rating was a dismal 29%. On paper, at least, the conservative billionaire-politico still has time to turn things around. Not many expect him to. The Economist, by no means a leftist publication, recently described Piñera as "inept." Several Cabinet ministers are already vying for the chance to replace him in 2014. And to make matters worse, the powerful student movement that pummeled Piñera throughout much of 2011 is showing signs it is ready for an encore performance. On April 25, an estimated 60,000 marched through the streets of Santiago.

All of this should be music to the ears of the once-formidable Concertación, the center-left coalition that dominated Chilean politics for two decades before narrowly losing the presidency to Piñera’s two-party Alianza (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010).

With nationwide municipal elections coming up later this year, the time is ripe for the Concertación to capitalize on the president’s shortcomings and put itself back in the country’s political pole position. Except, rather than launch a coordinated campaign against the Alianza, the Concertación’s four member parties have their hands full at the moment wrestling with a different political adversary—each other.

Coming apart at the seams

Formed in the waning days of the Gen. Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), the Concertación has had its share of disagreements before. The latter part of President Michelle Bachelet's term (2006-2010) was a particularly complicated time for the governing coalition, which bid adieu to several key lawmakers. One defector, then Deputy Marco Enríquez-Ominami, went on to finish third in the 2009 first-round presidential election (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009).

More recently, however, the Concertación’s various cracks and fissures seem to be coalescing into a single fault line that some observers fear could split the coalition in two. On one side of the divide are the Partido Socialista (PS) and the more centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), historically the Concertación’s biggest and most powerful member parties. On the other side are the Partido por la Democracia (PPD) and the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD).

The latest bone of contention between the two factions was a decision by the PRSD and PPD to form a municipal-election pact with the far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), which has enjoyed something of a renaissance of late thanks to last year’s education-reform movement and its charismatic PCCh leader, 24-year-old Camila Vallejo.

PRSD and PPD leaders say the pact, which only applies to city council positions, was brokered as a way to make the Concertación more inclusive, to give it a bit of new energy. Their counterparts...
in the PS and DC, however, are treating the move as act of open rebellion—even though the
Concertación as a whole has been negotiating similar election agreements with the far left for years.

DC president Ignacio Walker accused the PRSD and PPD of "emigrating" from the coalition. "This
is obviously the end of the Concertación," he said in an April 20 interview with Radio Cooperativa.
"I want them to know that these types of political decisions have political consequences." Soon
after, the DC head stepped down as the Concertación’s official spokesperson, saying: "How can I be
the spokesman for parties that are done with the Concertación?"

**Banking on Bachelet**

Walker believes the controversial electoral pact is evidence of a much larger plan by the PRSD and
PPD to form a "Frente Amplio de Izquierda," or broad leftist front. Presumably, the front would
include not just the PC but also groups like Enríquez-Ominami’s Partido Progresista (PRO) and Sen.
Alejandro Navarro’s Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS). Both Navarro and Enríquez-Ominami were
members of the PS before splitting off to form their own splinter parties.

Walker’s claims are not entirely unfounded. PPD president Carolina Tohá, a senator and former
Cabinet minister under Bachelet, aired the idea of such a bloc last year. Tohá’s original suggestion
was that the PS form part of the leftist front as well *(Notisur, Oct. 21, 2011).* The PS and DC
slammed the proposal, pledging mutual allegiance in the form of their own electoral pact. The
two parties reconfirmed that pact in late April, promising among other things to support a single
candidate for the next presidential election.

The PS already has a clear idea who that candidate should be: former President Bachelet, who left
office in early 2010 with a record approval rating of more than 80%. Bachelet now resides in New
York City, where she heads UN Women. So far she has been tight-lipped about her political future.
If Bachelet does decide to run, she has more than a good chance of winning, according to recent
polls. It is likely that her candidacy would also encourage the Concertación’s squabbling member
parties to bury their differences—at least for a while.

**The independent option**

What happens, though, if Bachelet does not run? The Concertación’s traditional approach has been
to decide on a candidate early—and behind closed doors. Neither is likely to happen if the popular
ex-president chooses not to compete. With no other obvious consensus candidate on the horizon,
the two Concertación blocs may instead end up backing separate candidates. If the rivalry gets
too heated, the two factions might even choose to compete in the general election, as the Alianza’s
two member parties—the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and far-right Unión Demócrata
Independiente (UDI)—did in 2005.

Conditions may also favor the emergence of an independent candidate. In the last election,
Enríquez-Ominami and far-left candidate Jorge Arrate drew more than 26% of the ballots between
them, proving there are certainly votes to be had for candidates hailing from outside Chile’s two
main coalition blocs. The Concertación candidate, Sen. and ex-President Eduardo Frei (1996-2000) of
the DC, won just 29% of the vote in that election.

Given how poorly both the Concertación and Alianza are faring in the polls, it’s easy to imagine
an independent faring even better this time around. Bachelet’s popular finance minister Andres
Velasco is banking on just that possibility. One of the few people on the left to make his presidential
ambitions public, Velasco is promising an independent run whether or not his former boss competes as well.

"This is the moment to discuss plans and ideas for Chile, not to continue with these empty, inward-focused arguments that the people don’t understand and don’t really care much about," said Velasco. "The more I see the political parties fighting for posts and quotas, the happier I am to be independent."

Next year’s presidential election is beginning to nourish historic rivalries on the political right as well. Already three names—all acting Cabinet ministers—are being tossed around as likely candidates.

Public opinion polls continue to favor Piñera’s Public Works Minister Laurence Golborne as the Alianza coalition’s best option. Golborne ingratiated himself with the Chilean public early on in the Piñera presidency thanks to his close involvement in a high-profile rescue operation of 33 miners who spent more than two months trapped deep underground in northern Chile’s Atacama desert (NotiSur, Nov. 19, 2010).

Like his boss, Golborne had a long career in business before joining the Cabinet—originally as mining minister. Unlike Piñera, a former senator and one-time RN party president, Golborne is politically independent, meaning he has never been a card-carrying member of either the RN or its Alianza partner, the UDI.

UDI leaders say the Alianza should also give Economy Minister Pablo Longueira serious consideration. Longueira, a UDI party stalwart, spent years in the Senate before being appointed last year to the Cabinet. The RN, meanwhile, is gunning for one of its political veterans: Defense Minister Andrés Allemand. An RN co-founder and past party president, Allemand forced his way into the election equation with a bang in late April, organizing a flurry of press interviews in which he declared his "clear interest" in the job.

"For me, the ideal format would be a primary...involving me, Minister Golborne, and Minister Longueira," Allemand explained in an interview with CHV’s Tolerancia Cero. "I think that this would be good [for the country]. It provides oxygen. It helps."

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