6-15-2012

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Popularity Bounce For Chile’s Apologetic President Sebastián Piñera

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Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2012-06-15

President Sebastián Piñera had at least one thing going for him during last month’s State of the Nation address: silence. Unlike in 2011, when hecklers interrupted him on several occasions (NotiSur, June 10, 2011), attendees for this year’s May 21 speech—an annual tradition in Chile—kept their mouths shut, giving the former businessman ample opportunity to sell the public on the merits of his two-and-a-half-year-old government.

There were other differences between the two speeches as well. For this, his penultimate State of the Nation address, the normally unapologetic third-year president struck something of a remorseful note. "We’ve experienced a climate of confrontation and even, in some cases, disparagement. That’s certainly not something the Chilean people deserve," he said early on in the speech. "I know that we’ve made mistakes, and I ask forgiveness for them."

The apology contrasted sharply with the provocative pose he struck during his previous May 21 address, when he made a number of fiery, podium-thumping proclamations, including his warning to the country’s "subversives" that they would "never have the last word."

The gesture appears to have paid the beleaguered president some political dividends. A survey published in early June by the polling firm Adimark measured a sharp spike in Piñera’s approval rating, which jumped 7 percentage points. Still, the conservative leader would be hard-pressed to call this a comeback; even with the sudden boost, public support for Piñera stands at just 33%, according to Adimark. Furthermore, roughly 58% of poll respondents said they disapprove of the president.

The numbers are no doubt perplexing for Piñera, a 62-year-old billionaire who came into office promising to parlay his experience as a successful investor into steady economic growth and jobs creation for the country as a whole. Chile’s macroeconomic statistics suggest he has accomplished just that. Despite a devastating earthquake that struck just days before Piñera’s inauguration (NotiSur, March 12, 2010), the economy has grown steadily in the past two years—by 5.2% in 2010 and 6% last year. Unemployment, meanwhile, has fallen to its lowest rate in years, dropping to just 6.6% by the end of 2011.

Piñera used last month’s State of the Nation address to highlight his government’s other accomplishments as well. Post-quake reconstruction, he explained, is nearly complete. The government extended paid maternity leave from three months to six months. It pushed legislation to eliminate monthly health-insurance fees for retired people. More recently, it lobbied Congress to pass an equal-rights bill that had been kicking around the legislature since 2005.

"We don’t want there to be any more cases like that of Daniel Zamudio, who lost his life to hate, intolerance, and prejudices," said Piñera, referring to a 24-year-old homosexual man who died earlier this year after being beaten and tortured by a group with apparent neo-Nazi leanings (NotiSur, April 20, 2012). "We always promote a tolerant society, one that doesn’t discriminate
against anyone based on ethnic origin, social standing, physical appearance, religious preference, or sexual orientation."

**One protest after another**

Yet, for all of Piñera’s efforts to underscore such achievements, what many Chileans remember instead from the past two years is a government that is often at odds with its own population.

Outbreaks of popular discontent, from north to south, have put the president and his Cabinet squarely on the defensive, prompting reactions that waver confusingly between appeasement and repression.

The president enjoyed a fair amount of success during his first year in office. The improbable rescue in late 2010 of 33 miners who had spent more than two months trapped deep underground earned the conservative leader a standing ovation both at home and abroad.

By year’s end, however, Piñera was already starting to stumble. Opposition leaders began hammering the president on reconstruction, saying the government had been slow to provide housing solutions to the tens of thousands left homeless by the quake (NotiSur, Dec. 10, 2010). In December, a catastrophic prison fire killed 81 inmates in Santiago (NotiSur, Jan. 21, 2011). The following month, in far southern Chile, residents brought the city of Punta Arenas to a standstill because of government plans to lift subsidies on natural gas. Two protestors died during the standoff, which cost the energy minister his job.

Energy issues triggered major demonstrations again in May 2011, when environmental authorities approved a controversial plan to build five massive hydroelectric dams in the southern Aysén region. Tens of thousands took to the streets of Santiago and other Chilean cities to protest the multibillion-dollar HidroAysén project (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2008, and NotiEn, July 2011).

In the meantime, groups of university and secondary students began organizing their own protests. What began as a series of isolated demonstrations regarding the quality and cost of education in Chile soon coalesced into a full-blown movement that managed to garner widespread popular support (NotiSur, July 22, 2011). As the numbers of students participating in the protests grew—in some cases reaching hundreds of thousands—organizers began calling for no less than a complete overhaul of the country’s education system. Chief among their demands was that the government guarantee free public education for all, an idea that Piñera—who received his own education in costly Catholic schools—continues to reject.

"We know that some are proposing free education for all, and not just for low- and middle-class [students] who need it most," the president said in his May 21 address. "Frankly, in a country like ours, with so many shortages and inequalities, it’s just not right for the state to use the resources of all Chileans to finance the education of the most [economically] favored."

"People object to his personality"

Piñera’s center-left predecessor, ex-President Michele Bachelet (2006-2010), had her own trials and tribulations during her presidential tenure, including a series of large-scale student demonstrations known as La Revolución de los Pingüinos—the penguin revolution (NotiSur, June 23, 2006). She faltered as well by implementing what proved to be a costly, confusing, and wildly unpopular Santiago bus-system overhaul called Transantiago (NotiSur, April 13, 2007). Public confidence in her leadership fell sharply. By mid-2007, Bachelet’s approval rating dropped below the 40% mark.
The president weathered the storm, however, and by mid-2009 was enjoying approval ratings in the 70% range. By the end of the year, support for Bachelet reached 80%, and, in early 2010, when she left office, she scored an unprecedented 84% approval rating, according to an Adimark survey.

On paper, at least, Piñera, whose term runs until March 2014, could make a similar turnaround. Few expect him to. "This has been a good government. From the beginning, much better than Bachelet’s," veteran politician Jorge Schaulsohn, a moderate, opined in a recent interview with the magazine Cosas. "The thing is, though, that nobody likes Piñera. People object to his personality."

Schaulsohn, a longtime leader within the opposition Concertación, broke ranks with the four-party coalition during Bachelet’s presidency. In the 2010 election, he voted for Piñera rather than for the Concertación standard bearer, ex-President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000).

"The other problem [Piñera faces] is that there are still a lot of people in Chile over whom the left exercises a kind of ‘moral bullying,’” said Schaulsohn. "They’re embarrassed to say the support a rightist government because of everything that happened with the [1973] coup. The right was very discredited."

**Betting on a bridge to Chiloé**

The one exception, opinion polls show, is Piñera’s charismatic Public Works Minister Laurence Golborne, a 50-year-old independent and former business executive whose political capital soared during the drawn-out mine rescue in 2010. At the time, Golborne served as head of the Ministerio de Minería.

Presented with the open question, "Who would you like the next president of Chile to be?" 7% of respondents to a recent Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) poll named Golborne. Only 2%, in contrast, chose Defense Minister Andrés Allemand. Another 2% named Piñera, who, like all standing presidents in Chile, is barred from serving consecutive terms. Other figures in the governing Alianza coalition fared even worse: only 1% of respondents opted for Labor Minister Evelyn Matthei. Economy Minister Pablo Longueira, another possible candidate, figured even lower down the list.

Golborne outranks all but one of the left’s leading figures as well, the April poll found. Only 2% of respondents named Marco Enríquez-Ominami, a left-leaning independent who finished a surprising third in the first round of the 2009 election (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009). And just 1% opted for ex-President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006).

With Golborne, explained Schaulsohn, "It’s like the right has come up with its own Michelle Bachelet. These are the people who, even without a long [political] trajectory, find themselves with the highest citizen approval. They have something that allows them to connect with the emotional side of public opinion."

Just how far those kinds of comparisons can really go is debatable. As well as the charming public works minister did in the CEP poll, Bachelet did even better—much better. More than half of respondents (51%) picked the popular ex-president to replace Piñera in 2014, putting her head and shoulders above the would-be competition, Golborne included.

So far, Bachelet has made no indication she even plans to run again. The political right is not taking any chances. Since the CEP poll was released, leaders of the conservative Alianza have tried again...
to rake Bachelet over the coals for her government’s failure, in the hours immediately after the 2010 earthquake, to warn citizens about the threat of a tsunami. Several hundred people drowned when tsunami waves struck the Chilean coast and the Juan Fernández Islands.

President Piñera did his part for the Alianza cause by announcing, during his May 21 address, new plans to build a bridge between the Chilean mainland and the southern island of Chiloé. Ex-President Lagos made a similar proposal during his term in office. For cost reasons, however, his successor, Bachelet, nixed the idea.

The bridge project—assuming tangible progress is made over the next year and a half – could give the political right a chance to shine precisely where Bachelet failed. It also gives Golborne—who as public works minister will be in charge of the bridge project—new opportunities to stay in the political spotlight.

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