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Municipal Elections "Debacle" For Chile’s Governing Coalition

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President Sebastián Piñera’s center-right Alianza coalition stumbled in municipal elections, held late last month throughout Chile, dropping tight mayoral races in several conservative strongholds.

But, while most pundits and political leaders agree the elections were a "defeat" for the Alianza, few are clear on what the results mean for its traditional rival, the still influential but increasingly fractured Concertación coalition.

The Alianza, a political partnership between the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and the more-moderate Renovación Nacional (RN), suffered its biggest losses in and around Santiago, Chile’s sprawling capital. The city—home to roughly one-third of the country’s population—is divided into several dozen independent comunas (municipalities).

While the governing coalition retained control in upscale comunas like Las Condes and La Dehesa, it suffered a stinging upset in "the mother of all battles," as the mayoral race in Santiago Centro was dubbed. Partido por la Democracia (PPD) head Carolina Tohá beat incumbent Pablo Zalaquett (UDI) handily—50% to 43%—despite trailing in the polls, in some cases by as much as 10%. Tohá, a former deputy, also served briefly as Cabinet spokesperson under President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010). Her come-from-behind victory was all the more surprising given that Alianza mayors have run Santiago for the past dozen years.

"Losing Santiago hurts a lot," Piñera’s then government spokesperson Andrés Chadwick acknowledged in an interview with Canal 13. "There was a lot of expectation that Pablo Zalaquett would be re-elected….This was a case where the polls got it wrong." Chadwick has since been appointed interior minister, replacing Rodrigo Hinzpeter, who is now defense minister.

Center-left challengers ousted rightist incumbents in the traditionally conservative Santiago comunas of Providencia and Ñuñoa as well. Cristián Labbé (UDI), a retired colonel who served dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) as a member of the regime’s secret police, lost the Providencia race (56% to 43%) to a relatively unknown political independent, 59-year-old community organizer Josefa Errázuriz. "Hate, intolerance, and lack of respect have won out," said Labbé, who refused to congratulate his opponent.

"I'm happy," Labbé later said in an interview with the daily La Tercera. "I continue to be a retired colonel. Many people use that against me, making it out to be something pejorative. But for me it’s a tremendous honor."

Ñuñoa Mayor Pedro Sabat (RN) lost his re-election bid by a far-narrower margin, falling by fewer than 20 votes to Maya Fernández Allende, a granddaughter of toppled ex-President Salvador Allende (1970-1973). A democratically elected Marxist, Salvador Allende died during a Sept. 11, 1973, coup that paved the way for Pinochet’s 17-year military dictatorship. Like Labbé, Sabat had held his post for 16 years. The RN is currently demanding a recount.
A "punishing" defeat
With losses also in outlying Santiago districts such as Huechuraba, Recoleta, and Independencia, as well as in Concepción, Chile's second-largest city, the Alianza saw its total number of mayorships drop from 144 to 121. Opposition parties, in contrast, upped the number of municipalities they control from 147 to 168. Nationwide, the Alianza won roughly 37% of all mayoral votes cast, while the opposition, which was divided into two blocks, won a combined 43%.

The Alianza did win mayoral races in some major municipalities, including in the twin coastal cities of Valparaiso and Viña del Mar, and in populous working-class Santiago suburbs La Florida and Puente Alto. Overall, however, the results were a "debacle" for the Alianza, said Puente Alto's outgoing mayor, Manuel José Ossandón, also an RN vice president. "I think the people awarded the center-left," he told Radio Cooperativa. "Not that [the opposition] deserved it, since they've also done a bad job. But more than anything else [the voters] punished us."

Most observers agree with Ossandón. The elections were a clear blow for the governing coalition, whose chances of retaining the presidency after Piñera's term expires in March 2014 seem to be growing dimmer by the day. This was the Alianza's first electoral test since winning the presidency in 2010. By all accounts, it flunked the exam.

"I don't recall ever seeing such a significant setback for a [governing coalition] in its first election," political scientist Francisco Javier Díaz told the online news site El Mostrador. "If you look back all the way to the radical governments of the 1930s, the governing parties always won the first election that came up."

And The Winner Is?
What is not yet clear, however, is who the real victors were. As a whole, the Alianza’s left-leaning opponents fared well. The center-left’s problem, however, is that it no longer is a whole—certainly not in the way it was in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the four-party Concertación dominated national politics, winning four straight presidencies (1990-2010).

The once formidable coalition is by no means dead and buried. And it may well regain the presidency in 2014, especially if ex-President Bachelet chooses to run again. Bachelet, currently working in New York City as head of UN Women, left office in 2010 with an 80% approval rating. But the Concertación does have some serious problems, both in credibility and cohesion. Even as opinion polls continue to shine on Bachelet, they show crumbling popular support for the coalition as a whole. A September survey by pollster Adimark estimated approval for the Concertación at just 19%, significantly lower than Piñera’s also unpopular Alianza (27%).

The dismal poll numbers have helped exacerbate intracoalition divisions that began to appear even before Piñera’s victory three years ago. Increasingly, Concertación members are gravitating into two rival camps, with the more centrist Partido Socialista (PS) and Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC) on one side and the "progressive" PPD and Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD)—which are keen to improve relations with the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) and other left-wing fringe groups —on the other (Notisur, May 4, 2012).

The split was particularly evident in last month’s municipal elections, when the center-left ran as two separate blocs: the Concertación Democrática, made up of the PS, DC, and some independents;
and Por un Chile Justo, a coalition of the PCCh, PRSD, PPD, and other independents. Together the two blocs "won" the election, earning a combined 43% of all mayoral votes and nearly 50% of city council votes. The Alianza drew 37% and 33% respectively. Separately, however, the two opposition groups actually fared worse than the governing coalition. Concertación Democrática won 30% of mayoral votes and 28% of city council votes, while Por un Chile Justo finished with 13% and 22%.

Chile’s political winds appear to be shifting left. But unless the Concertación can better manage its differences, there is no guarantee it will be able to capitalize. Only time will tell, for example, if Carolina Tohá’s surprising victory in Santiago signals a comeback for the Concertación or whether it emboldens the PPD and Un Chile Justo to keep forging a new leftist block.

A "real alternative"?

Josefa Errázuriz’s win over Cristián Labbé in Providencia raises similar questions. Errázuriz, a sociologist and former UN worker, received Concertación backing but ran very much as an independent. Her campaign also enjoyed a real boost from coordinator Giorgio Jackson, a university student who rose to prominence during last year’s student uprising.

Carlos Correa, head of the consulting group Asuntos Públicos de Imaginación Consultores, said the Providencia race was "an epic fight in which the Concertación did not have a leadership role." Errázuriz's victory "is proof," he told El Mostrador, "that the social movements don’t need [the Concertación] to win. In the Concertación, they thought they could embody change, but this goes to show that’s not the case."

In all likelihood, the still-percolating education-reform movement influenced mayoral races in Providencia and elsewhere long before campaigning even began. At its peak in mid-2011, the student-led education-reform movement involved massive street demonstrations that dominated headlines and enjoyed widespread popular support (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011). Rightist mayors like Labbé, Zalaquett, and Sabat nevertheless backed efforts to crack down on the protests, putting them directly at odds with popular opinion. The left’s emblematic victories in Providencia, Ñuñoa, and Santiago, in other words, may have had as much to do with the incumbents’ records vis-à-vis the student protests as they did with the particular political platforms of the winning candidates.

The movement’s influence was even more evident in Estación Central, a working-class comuna just west of Santiago Centro. There, the students came very close to putting one of their own in office. Movement leader Camilo Ballesteros, representing the PCCh, came within a hair’s breadth (47.14% versus 48.55%) of unseating rightist incumbent Rodrigo Delgado (UDI).

"They told us that we young people couldn’t bring about change. They told us we’d get 15% of the votes. Today I’d say that the numbers speak for themselves," Ballesteros told reporters. "We showed that the youth can make history. We showed that we're a real alternative for bringing about change in this country."

The other 61%

And yet of all the numbers that stood out in last month’s elections, perhaps the most striking for Chile’s political pundits was the rate of abstention: 61%, a record high. Overall, some 800,000 fewer people participated in this year’s elections than in the past round of municipal contests in 2008 (NotiSur, Nov. 21, 2008).
Some analysts had predicted the opposite would be true. Prior to this election, participation was limited to registered voters, who were then required by law to cast ballots. Registered voters who failed to show up on election day were fined. In an effort to encourage more young people to vote, lawmakers recently dumped the registration requirement. As a result, the number of people eligible to vote in last month’s elections shot up from about 8 million in 2008 to roughly 13.4 million.

But the new laws also made voting voluntary for the first time. In the end, millions of Chileans exercised their newfound right to not vote. At first glance, the electorate seems to be leaning left—at least according to the 39% of eligible voters who participated in the municipal elections. The sample, however, is admittedly small. Without any way of knowing what the other 61% of the electorate think, the opposition would do well to keep its enthusiasm in check.

"There’s a big segment of the population that didn’t vote, that watched this process from afar," said PRSD head José Antonio Gómez, a senator and possible presidential candidate. "We can’t get too excited. Sure, the people who did vote gave us a majority. But we don’t know how the people who didn’t vote feel."

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