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Former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet Launches Bid For Second Term

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Back home after a several-year hiatus abroad, former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) has made a late—though not altogether unexpected—leap into Chile’s presidential race. The last to join the country’s crowded field of contenders, the popular ex-president nevertheless begins her quest for a second term as the clear favorite. Elections are scheduled to take place Nov 17.

Bachelet officially launched her bid on March 27, just hours after returning to Chile from the US, where she spent two and one-half years as head of the New York City-based UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). "Here I am, together with you, ready to take on this challenge, which is personal, but above all else, collective," Bachelet told supporters in El Bosque, a working-class Santiago suburb where she spent part of her childhood. "With joy, determination, and a lot of humility, I’ve made the decision to be a candidate."

The announcement put an end to years of "will she, won’t she" talk about the 61-year-old politician, who left office three years ago with approval ratings above 80% and, according to poll after poll, remains the country’s most popular political figure. Bachelet, who was prevented by Chilean law from seeking immediate re-election, ceded power in early 2010 to President Sebastián Piñera of the conservative Alianza coalition. She was the last of four consecutive presidents from the center-left Concertación coalition, which led Chile for two decades following the end of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Bachelet will first test her front-runner status in a coalition primary, set for late June, as a representative of both the Partido Socialista (PS) and Partido por la Democracia (PPD). The Concertación’s other member parties, the Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD) and centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), will be represented by Sen. José Antonio Gómez and ex-Peñalolén mayor Claudio Orrego, respectively. Andrés Velasco, a Harvard-educated economist who served as Bachelet’s finance minister, will also participate in the primary—as an independent.

The governing Alianza coalition, which ties together the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), is planning its own June primary. The contest will feature just two candidates: Andrés Allamand, an RN co-founder and former senator who recently served a spell as defense minister, and Laurence Golborne (UDI), who held several ministerial posts under Piñera. Golborne soared to political prominence in 2010 when, as head of the Ministerio de Minería, he oversaw the successful rescue of 33 miners who spent more than two months trapped in a partially collapsed mine in Chile’s northern Atacama desert.

Rounding out the field of candidates are Marcel Claude, a leftist economist who is running on an environmental platform, and Marco Enríquez-Ominami, a former deputy who left the PS in 2009 and now heads an upstart group, the Partido Progresista de Chile (PRO). Enríquez-Ominami competed for the presidency four years ago as an independent (NotiSur, June 26, 2009). Just 36 at the time, he finished third in first-round voting with 20% of the vote (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009 ). As he
did in 2009, Enríquez-Ominami plans to skip the Concertación primary and compete in the general election directly.

Still a ways to go

Bachelet is expected to breeze through the primary process. Early polls put her well ahead of her rivals in the Alianza as well. When asked whom they would "like" Chile’s next president to be, 49% of respondents to a December 2012 survey by the prestigious Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) named Bachelet. Second on the list was Golborne (11%), followed by Allamand (5%), Enríquez-Ominami (4%), and Velasco (2%). CEP also asked respondents whom they "thought" would be the next president. Bachelet again came out well in front with 53% versus 11% for Golborne and 3% for Allamand.

Still, with seven months to go before the November election, the contest is far from decided. Some analysts point to a recent rebound in President Piñera’s approval rating as evidence that the race could tighten up as candidates reach the November finish line. Support for the president now stands at 38%, up 6% since last September, according to the polling firm Adimark. With the economy growing at a steady clip (GDP rose 6% in 2012) and unemployment down to historic lows, there is a strong possibility that Piñera’s approval numbers will improve even more—maybe even reach 50% by election time, Adimark director Roberto Méndez predicted in a recent interview with La Segunda.

"The fate of the Alianza candidates has everything to do with how well the [Piñera] administration is faring," said Méndez. "If it has an approval rating of 20%, as it did at one point, there’s no way [Golborne or Allamand] can win. But if support reaches 40% or better, one of those candidates will at least have a shot."

Bachelet, in the meantime, will have to start answering questions about her own presidential record, which most analysts agree was not nearly as spectacular as her end-of-term approval ratings would imply. Her implementation in late 2006 of Transantiago, an overhaul of Greater Santiago’s city bus system, was wildly unpopular (NotiSur, April 13, 2007). Economic growth dipped during Bachelet’s tenure. Unemployment rose. Critics also accuse her administration of botching its response to a massive earthquake that hit Chile in February 2010, just days before Piñera took office. Approximately 500 people lost their lives in the disaster (NotiSur, March 12, 2010). Most were killed by tsunami waves.

Students, labor unions, and environmental groups also took umbrage at Bachelet’s stewardship. In mid-2006, tens of thousands of Chilean high school students, nicknamed "penguins" because of their black-and-white uniforms, took part in series of protest that together became known as the revolución de los pingüinos (NotiSur, June 23, 2006). Later in her term, the then president angered environmentalists by green-lighting government-funded research on nuclear power plants and by ignoring a popular movement to block HidroAysén, a still-pending plan to build massive hydroelectric dams in a far southern wilderness area.

Demanding structural reforms

The Concertación paid a political toll for the aforementioned problems. With former President Eduardo Frei (1996-2000) as its chosen representative, the coalition stumbled in the 2009 election. Public approval for the Concertación has dropped even further since. And yet, Bachelet left office
more popular than ever. Analysts have been scratching their heads about the matter ever since. Most attribute Bachelet’s success to her personality. She has a quiet charisma, they say, a way of presenting herself that, for whatever reason, simply resonates with the Chilean public.

"Ex-President Bachelet has an ability to transmit closeness, to show that she’s concerned about problems that affect the people," political scientist Cristóbal Bellolio told the AFP wire service. "The Concertación’s approval rating continues to drop. Its most important leaders are at the bottom of the list in approval. But she remains unscathed, immaculate."

Bachelet’s lengthy absence from Chile helped nurture that "immaculate" image even more. For three years, she carefully kept herself above and beyond the political fray by burying herself in her post as head of UN Women, keeping media contact to a minimum, and only returning home on rare occasions.

President Piñera, in the meantime, soon found himself bopped and battered by all that his predecessor—thanks to her hiatus in New York City—was able to avoid. Large protests erupted in 2011 when environmental authorities green-lighted HidroAysén (NotiSur, June 10, 2011). Bachelet’s energy and interior ministers had both expressed support for the project. In the end, however, her administration passed the buck when it came to giving the venture final approval. Piñera paid the price. Even more damaging for the conservative leader were a series of student protests that began around the same time and eventually coalesced into a massive movement that continues to percolate (NotiSur, July 22, 2011).

The demonstrators, who want nothing less than a complete overhaul of the country’s inconsistent and in many cases expensive education system, earned widespread popular support. Their success boosted other social movements, which together have begun calling for other major structural reforms. Many Chileans say its high time to replace the country’s dictatorship-era Constitution. Another thing the country should scrap, they say, is the binominal majoritarian voting system used to elect members of Congress (NotiSur, Feb. 10, 2012). The curious system favors parliamentary balance by preventing any one coalition from controlling both seats in a given district unless its two candidates together can double the total votes received by their opposition rivals. The system has historically favored the right, which, not surprisingly, has blocked past attempts to change the rules.

**Promising a "new social majority"**

Having emerged from her splendid isolation, Bachelet will now have to contend with these powerful new currents, whose protagonists are often as critical of the establishment left—namely the Concertación—as they are of the conservative government in power. Bachelet "isn't returning to the same country she left," Giorgio Jackson, a key leader in the 2011 student uprising, told reporters last month. "She returns to a country that’s mobilized, that’s more aware."

The candidate will have her hands full in the coming months trying to ingratiate herself with Chile’s mobilized social movements while at the same time making sure she protects her ties to the Concertación’s tarnished but still influential veteran core. The ex-president’s success in the coming months may thus depend less on how well she fends off her Alianza rivals than on how she manages relations within Chile’s energized but deeply divided left.

During her campaign kickoff in El Bosque, Bachelet promised to forge "a new social majority" dedicated to reforming Chile’s basic structures and thus improving the distribution of resources.
"We know that there is widespread frustration among citizens. We’ve seen it from the students, from the middle class, from [the outlying] regions," she said. "The rage… is justified." Chile’s enormous income breach, the candidate went on to say, has created divisions that are "both ethically and politically unacceptable and unsustainable."

Four days later, Bachelet made an even more obvious overture to the mobilized left. Speaking in Conchalí, another outlying Santiago district, she promised that, if elected, her first task would be to submit legislation outlawing for-profit education. "Education is a concern, it’s something that’s urgent and is being demanded by a large majority of Chileans. It’s an issue, in my opinion, that affects more than just certain age groups, communities, or social groups."

In the end, winning a second term in office may prove to be the relatively easy part for Chile’s recently returned "prodigal daughter." The more difficult task could come later, when Bachelet will have to put her many promises into practice against stiff conservative opposition. Either that or face a potential left-wing backlash.

"Chilean society has become a puzzle that’s difficult to decipher and understand," political analyst Héctor Soto explained in a recent essay. "The middle class … is different now, more empowered, proud, more aware of its rights and responsibilities." It is also "angry with the elites," he explained. "For now, Michelle Bachelet has been free from this rancor. But it’s not clear she can stay that way."

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