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In Final State Of The Nation Address, President Sebastián Piñera Makes A Pitch For Political Continuity

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Taking the podium last month for his fourth and final State of the Nation speech, President Sebastián Piñera delivered a resounding toot of his own horn, citing an array of facts and figures to make the case that Chileans are better off now than they were when he took office three years ago. The approach looks to have paid dividends: a poll released in early June showed a six-point bump in Piñera’s approval rating. But with Chile’s next election just five months away, the president’s conservative coalition still has some convincing to do if it hopes to stay in power beyond March 2014, when Piñera is set to leave office.

Because of Chile’s term-limit laws, which prohibit presidents from serving consecutive terms, Piñera cannot immediately stand for re-election. His coalition, the two-party Alianza, is instead being represented by a pair of recent Cabinet members: Pablo Longueira of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and Andrés Allamand of the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN). The two candidates, veterans of their respective parties, are set to compete later this month in an intracoalition primary. For the moment, both are considered long shots to beat the leading opposition candidate, former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), in the upcoming Nov. 17 election. A runoff, should it be necessary, is scheduled for Dec. 15.

Desperate to blow a little wind into the Alianza’s sagging sails, Piñera spent much of his speech—which was held, as tradition dictates, on May 21—focusing on his administration’s economic accomplishments. Since his presidency began, Chile’s economy has grown at an average annual rate of 5.8%, tops among all members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Piñera noted. During that same three-year span, he added, the country’s annual per capita GDP jumped from US$15,000 to US$20,000. Investment and wages have also increased, while unemployment has fallen to a record low.

"As president of all the Chilean people, I can’t help but feel proud of Chile, whose achievements, which have been occurring at a time of global uncertainty, are being acknowledged and admired abroad," the president said.

The May 21 address also gave Piñera an opportunity to take a few thinly veiled swings at front-runner Bachelet. Without mentioning the popular ex-president by name, Piñera offered a scathing assessment of his predecessor’s economic stewardship. "These have without a doubt been very difficult times to lead," he said. "When we took office, the economy was losing its capacity to grow, to create jobs and increase salaries. Poverty and inequality were increasing. Education quality was stagnant. Investment and productivity were dropping."

Under his leadership, in contrast, the economy has created 800,000 jobs, Piñera boasted. In Latin America, Chile is second to only Brazil when it comes to foreign direct investment (FDI). Automobile sales have doubled. Average house size has gone up. People are going to the movies more frequently. Public-education spending has increased: from less than US$9 billion in 2009 to
US$14 billion last year. There has even been growth in the number of books being written in Chile, the president noted.

"Chile is a better place nowadays to be born, to study, to work, to start a business, to form a family, and to get old. To sum it up, it's a better country to live in than it was three years ago," said Piñera.

**Popularity bump**

Among the country’s political leaders, reactions to the May 21 presidential address were predictably partisan. While Piñera’s allies hailed the speech as a triumph, opponents focused on what the president left out of his speech. Piñera failed, for example, to discuss consumer protection, said Ignacio Walker, head of the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC). Nor did he outline lasting solutions to the country’s energy and education problems, the DC leader told Radio Cooperativa.

"Let’s be clear about this. The major sustainable reforms [that Chile needs] are still pending," he said.

The DC is one of four member parties in the opposition Concertación, which also includes Bachelet’s Partido Socialista (PS), the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD), and the Partido por la Democracia (PPD). Bachelet will represent both the PS and PPD in her own intracoalition primary, set to take place June 30. Her challengers include Claudio Orrego (DC), Sen. José Antonio Gómez (PRSD), and Andrés Velasco, Bachelet’s former finance minister, who is running as an independent (NotiSur, April 19, 2013).

Less predictable was how the speech would play out with the Chilean public as a whole. At first glance, the address appears to have been a success: the polling firm Adimark said Piñera’s approval rating jumped to 40% in May, his highest level in more than two years. How much impact the president’s popularity spike will have on the two conservative candidates hoping to replace him remains to be seen, however.

No doubt the Alianza could use a boost, especially after a pair of recent financial scandals forced then candidate Laurence Golborne—widely hailed as the right’s best shot at beating Bachelet—to drop out of the race (NotiSur, May 10, 2013). The loss of Golborne added insult to injury for an administration that, despite notching consistently solid growth and employment figures, has struggled to recover from the political beating it took in 2011, when student groups launched a series of massive street demonstrations to demand education reform.

**Questioning the Constitution**

Piñera made some efforts early on to engage student leaders, who are calling for a deep overhaul of the country’s education system and continue to organize periodic protests. The administration has increased overall education spending, reduced interest rates for student loans, and made more scholarships available for qualifying students.

The president has drawn a line in the sand, however, on the issue of tuition costs. Students demand the state make cost-free education available to everyone. Piñera, as he reiterated in his State of the Nation speech, insists that those who can afford to pay for school should. "It doesn’t seem fair to us to use resources of all Chileans … to finance education for privileged young people," he said.

Bachelet, who faced her own student uprising in 2006 (NotiSur, June 23, 2006), has taken a far more flexible approach in her dealings with the ongoing education-reform movement. Earlier this month,
the former president outlined a plan to provide universal free education within six years. She has also tried to ingratiate herself with students and other left-leaning social movements by openly questioning the legitimacy of Chile’s Constitution, which was drafted and approved during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

The Constitution has undergone several amendments since the country returned to democracy but still contains a number of controversial elements, including the binomial majoritarian system used to elect members of Congress. 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. Critics say it has led to an overrepresentation of the right.

**Opposing visions**

With Bachelet leaning left, the Alianza appears to be shifting further right—as evidenced by the UDI’s choice to replace Golborne, a purported political moderate, with the unapologetically conservative Longueira. Piñera has done his part as well to rally the Alianza’s more right-wing base. In his May 21 address, he expressed support for Chile’s no-exceptions abortion law, promised government bonuses (of between US$200 and US$400) for families willing to have a third, fourth, or fifth child, and announced plans to send a bill to Congress making it illegal to verbally insult a carabinero (uniformed police officer).

"Let this be clear: this administration is not going to tolerate aggression or insults of our carabineros," the president said. "We know that a carabinero who is better protected and more respected is much more effective in protecting our security and in maintaining public order."

The announcement drew sharp rebukes from members of Chile’s far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), which chose earlier this month to give Bachelet an early endorsement. In past elections, the PCCh has challenged the Concertación with candidates of its own, withholding support for the center-left coalition until a runoff. The party’s president, Guillermo Teillier, described the carabinero bill as "very dangerous," a throwback to something "we, in our country, have already lived through." PCCh Deputy Hugo Gutiérrez was even more indignant. In a controversial Twitter post, Gutiérrez called Piñera an "idiota." He later told reporters he had used the term "in the Greek sense." An "idiot," Gutiérrez said, is someone who does not take into account the needs of the "polis" (the people).

Bachelet took a far more diplomatic approach in responding to Piñera’s address. The ex-president acknowledged that her successor has made "advances on various issues." His overall view of how the country should be run, however, is too narrow, she suggested. Right now Chileans have "opposing visions," said Bachelet. "One side wants more of the same, meaning they want things to continue as they are, with a few adjustments here and there. Our [perspective] is that there needs to be deep reforms so that, ultimately, all Chileans can benefit from our [economic] growth."

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