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Chile's Ex-President Michelle Bachelet Cements Front-Runner Status With Landslide Primary Win

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Former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) remains the candidate to beat following presidential primary elections held June 30 for Chile's two principal political blocs: the governing Alianza and center-left Concertación coalitions.

Bachelet won the Concertación primary easily, scooping up 73% of the vote to secure a place on the ballot for Chile's Nov. 17 presidential election. Independent candidate Andrés Velasco, who served under then President Bachelet as finance minister, finished second with 13%. Third place went to Claudio Orrego of the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), who won less than 9% of the vote. José Antonio Gómez of the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD) finished last with 5%.

"This gives us a tremendous base and a tremendous responsibility to continue advancing," Bachelet told supporters later that evening. "We've completed the first stage of this campaign, but the second stage begins now, immediately. And the presidential race isn't a done deal. The worst mistake we could make, regardless of how happy we are today because of the excellent result, would be to let our guard down and not keep working until we win, hopefully in the first round."

Bachelet's principal rival in the November election will be Pablo Longueira, who narrowly won the Alianza primary against Andrés Allamand of the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN). Longueira hails from the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), the RN's more conservative Alianza partner. Former senators, both candidates served as ministers under President Sebastián Piñera, Chile's first conservative leader since dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Unlike Bachelet, whose strong showing in the primary was widely anticipated, Longueira was something of an underdog going into his head-to-head showdown with Allamand. The UDI veteran entered the race late, announcing his candidacy just two months ago after his party’s original contender, Laurence Golborne, was forced out amid a pair of financial scandals (Notisur, May 10, 2013). Allamand, in contrast, had been campaigning since last November, when both he and Golborne gave up their respective ministerial posts to focus on the race.

Pundits predicted that Allamand's more-moderate views would also be an asset against Longueira, an unapologetic conservative who began his political career as a junior-level advisor in the Pinochet government’s Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo. With support from the Alianza’s right-wing base and from voters in Santiago’s wealthiest communities, Longueira proved his skeptics wrong, sneaking past Allamand with an advantage of roughly 20,000 votes. "If after just two months we were able to win the primary, then we’ll win in November, too," the UDI stalwart told supporters.

Advantage Bachelet

History would seem to suggest otherwise. Since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, no candidate who openly collaborated with the military regime has been able to win the presidency. Current
Social Development Minister Joaquín Lavín (UDI) came close but ended up losing a runoff to President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006) in the 1999 election. Piñera, the one conservative who did win the presidency, is a relative moderate who was careful during his campaign to distance himself from the dictatorship. Piñera insisted on repeated occasions that he voted against Pinochet in Chile’s celebrated 1988 plebiscite, which paved the way for a return to democracy.

So far, the numbers are stacked against Longueira as well. Of the approximately 3 million Chileans who participated in the recent primaries, more than half voted for Bachelet, who ended up drawing more support than Longueira and Allamand combined. Opinion polls tell a similar story. Roughly 75% of respondents to a survey last December by the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), widely regarded as Chile’s most prestigious polling agency, said they have a "positive" or "very positive" opinion of Bachelet. Only 21% said the same about Longueira, who ranked lower than both Allamand (40%) and Golborne (51%).

Based on the primary results, some analysts speculate that Bachelet could end up winning the election outright in November and thus avoid a runoff. The last candidate to settle matters in a single round was the Concertación’s Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), who won nearly 58% of the vote in the 1993 presidential election. Ex-President Frei tried but failed to be re-elected in early 2010, when he lost a tight second-round vote to Piñera (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010). Chilean law allows presidents to serve multiple terms but prohibits immediate reelection.

**Shifting to the left**

Standing in the way of a potential first-round knockout for Bachelet are a handful of leftist fringe candidates, including former deputy Marco Enriquez-Ominami, who won 20% of the vote in Chile’s last presidential contest. Enriquez-Ominami, once a member of Bachelet’s Partido Socialista (PS), now heads an upstart group called the Partido Progressista de Chile (PRO). The Partido Humanista (PH) is running its own candidate as well, economist Marcel Claude. Unlike past PH candidates, Claude is not being backed by the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), which decided in late May to endorse Bachelet. A third leftist candidate trying to make his way onto the ballot is economist and television host Franco Parisi.

Leftist challengers caused no shortage of problems for the Concertación in Chile’s last presidential election, when Enriquez-Ominami and Jorge Arrate (PCCh/PH) won more than 26% of the vote between them. Ex-President Frei won 29%, enough to squeeze into the runoff against Piñera, albeit with little momentum. Analysts predict Enriquez-Ominami and the other fringe challengers will have less of an impact this time around, in large part because Bachelet—since announcing her candidacy in March—has swung considerably to the left in an effort to align herself with student demonstrators and other social movements that have gained considerable influence in recent years.

Chile’s university and high school students have been highly active in the past two years, organizing periodic protests to demand major reforms to the country’s education system. The movement peaked in 2011 but continues to show signs of life. On June 26, four days before the primary elections, an estimated 100,000 students, labor-union members, and other movement supporters marched through the streets of Santiago, Chile’s bustling capital city. The massive demonstration coincided with a new round of school tomas (occupations), prompting clashes with police, who moved in early on the morning of June 27 to forcibly remove students from more than 20 different locations.
Bachelet, who faced her own student uprising in 2006 (NotiSur, June 23, 2006), has taken up the students’ demand for universal cost-free education, including at the university level. To pay for the education overhaul, the popular ex-president is posing a 5% hike on corporate taxes. She is also calling for an end to Chile’s binomial majoritarian voting system, which tends to favor rightist representation in Congress, and says it is time to scrap Chile’s current Constitution, which was drafted during the Pinochet dictatorship.

"This is a triumph for those demanding free, worthy, and quality education for each and every child and young person in our country," Bachelet explained during her post-primary victory speech. "You’ve voted for a new Constitution, one that has the stamp of our democracy, that looks toward the future, that we can identify with, and that consecrates our rights."

Bachelet has taken a decidedly progressive stance on environmental and social issues, as well. She now favors gay marriage, is calling for loosening Chile’s total ban on abortions, and has denounced the controversial HidroAysén project—a massive hydroelectric scheme slated for a wilderness area in far southern Chile’s Patagonia (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2008, and NotiEn, July 2011)—as "unviable."

**Sticking to the program?**

Longueira promises to stick with the Piñera government’s pro-business policies, which—as the president highlighted in his recent State of the Nation speech (NotiSur, June 21, 2013)—have pushed unemployment to record lows and helped the economy grow at an annual rate of more than 5%. The Alianza candidate favors modest education reform, saying the state should cover costs for the country’s poorest students. Like Piñera, however, he believes that those who can afford to pay for tuition should continue to do so.

The UDI stalwart opposes gay marriage, supports Chile’s no-exceptions abortion rules, and believes the multibillion-dollar HidroAysén project is both necessary and doable. He has also taken on the issue of illegal immigration, calling for stricter controls to protect Chilean jobs and resources from foreign, particularly Latin American, transplants. "[Undocumented immigrants] are harming Chileans," he told supporters in early June. "Many of them are taking jobs that could otherwise go to Chilean women. They’re using our health and education infrastructure."

A faithful disciple of the slain UDI ideologue Jaime Guzmán, who was assassinated in 1991 by militant leftists, Longueira is known as an uncompromising crusader for Chilean conservatism. The coming months are likely to test that reputation. Conventional wisdom suggests he will have to bend at least a bit toward the middle if he is to have any chance of catching Bachelet. "If we don’t confront these issues and show ourselves to be more open, they’re going to demolish us," RN vice president Manuel José Ossandon suggested in a recent interview with Radio Cooperativa.

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