8-9-2013

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Chile’s Reeling Right Switches Presidential Candidates Again After Pablo Longueira, Citing Depression, Bows Out

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Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2013-08-09

Three months after a financial scandal sank its most-promising presidential candidate, Chile’s governing coalition, the Alianza, has been forced to pass the proverbial baton yet again, opting this time for a contender better known for her occasional foul language than for her politics.

The conservative coalition’s new banner bearer, Labor Minister Evelyn Matthei, has nearly a quarter century of political experience under her belt but little time left to test her savoir-faire against her leading opposition challenger, former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), a clear favorite to win the country’s Nov. 17 election. Interestingly, the two women—both daughters of high-ranking Air Force officers—have known each other since they were children.

At the behest of President Sebastián Piñera, the Alianza cobbled together Metthei’s eleventh-hour candidacy in late July after its previous candidate, former economy minister Pablo Longueira, unexpectedly quit the race citing mental-health issues. Longueira is reportedly suffering from clinical depression. "He has had all the necessary and opportune medical attention, but there are moments in life when man proposes and God disposes," Juan Pablo Longueira, one of the candidate’s sons, told reporters on July 17. "In that case, one must be humble enough to recognize that there are problems that go beyond what we can cope with."

Longueira was even a late entry into the presidential race. His party, the conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), originally backed one of Longueira’s Cabinet colleagues, Laurence Golborne, a former business executive who soared to political prominence during a sensational government-led mine rescue in 2010. Widely hailed as the right’s best hope of beating Bachelet, Golborne was riding high in the saddle until late April, when a pair of financial scandals sent his political stock into a sudden nosedive (NotiSur, May 10, 2013). Within days, the UDI dumped the relatively inexperienced Golborne, replacing him with Longueira, a party veteran. Two months later, Longueira narrowly won an intracoalition primary against Andrés Allamand of the more moderate Renovación Nacional (RN). Bachelet won her own coalition primary—held the same day—in a landslide (NotiSur, July 12, 2013).

Disappointed by Allamand’s somewhat surprising primary loss, the RN was nevertheless quick to rally behind the victorious UDI candidate. Party leaders appear to be less enthusiastic about Longueira’s last-minute replacement. Matthei, a former congresswoman, began her political career with the RN but later switched to the UDI. After several days of hemming and hawing, the RN agreed in late July to support the new candidate, albeit begrudgingly—and only after Allamand passed on the opportunity to jump back into the race.

A tough talker
The RN’s lukewarm support is one problem that could haunt Matthei’s rushed run for the presidency. Chile’s quickly approaching election deadline is another. With the contest now just
three and a half months away, the 59-year-old candidate has only now appointed a campaign manager. Her political platform, by her own admission, is still a work in progress.

Bachelet, in contrast, has been campaigning hard since March, taking great pains to align herself with Chile’s influential education-reform movement by promising, among other things, free quality education for all (NotiSur, April 19, 2013). Matthei opposes the idea, insisting that students who can afford to pay tuition fees should continue to do so.

"I’ve been a candidate for four days. I haven’t yet put together my program. Still, I can tell you right away what I won’t do: free university education for everyone. No way!" Matthei said in a July 27 interview with the daily La Tercera. "Sorry, but I’d rather spend that money on good technical schools, on training for workers. A lot of workers in Chile haven’t finished high school. They’ve never had the opportunity to study anything."

Matthei has a reputation for speaking her mind, a tendency that has landed her in hot water on more than one occasion. Last October she made headlines after treating a group of opposition deputies to a barrage of garabatos (swear words). "It seems like some very prim and proper socialists were scandalized by the word huevón [idiot]," the unrepentant labor minister told reporters afterward. "The truth is, if they don’t want me to say that again, they need to stop being so disrespectful."

Matthei’s sharp-tongued antics contrast starkly with the more soft-spoken approach taken by her rival Bachelet, who is often described as a kind of national "mother figure." Last April, Matthei attacked Bachelet directly, openly accusing her of "ordering" an impeachment process against former education minister Harald Beyer, who was forced to resign following a no-confidence vote in Congress. Bachelet responded by saying she was "surprised" by Matthei’s remarks. "She knows me well and knows my family," the popular ex-president told reporters.

**Family ties**

President Piñera believes that Matthei, despite her extremely late start in the race, still has a chance to catch Bachelet. Most observers disagree, with many predicting that Bachelet could pass the 50% mark and thus win the election outright in November. Chile’s last three elections have been decided in second-round runoffs, which usually take place about a month after the general election. This year’s runoff, should it be necessary, is scheduled for Dec. 15.

Even if the Bachelet-Matthei showdown proves to be a political mismatch, the contest still promises plenty of drama, particularly because of the remarkable personal histories that tie the two rivals together.

Bachelet, just six at the time, and Matthei, two years her junior, first met in the late 1950s, when their families lived across the street from each other on the Cerro Moreno Air Force Base, near the northern city of Antofagasta. Their fathers, Gen. Alberto Bachelet and Fernando Matthei Aubel, a colonel at the time, grew to be friends and confidants. The girls attended the same school and reportedly played together at times in the street.

Chile’s tumultuous political history would later send the two Air Force officers—and their daughters—in very different directions. Alberto Bachelet worked closely with leftist President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), who was deposed in a bloody 1973 coup. Matthei Aubel went on to work for dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), who assumed leadership of the military junta.
responsible for the coup. Pinochet would remain in power until 1990, the same year Evelyn Matthei—then with the RN—won her first congressional election. The military strongman died in 2006, the same year then-President Michelle Bachelet assumed office (NotiSur, Jan. 5, 2007).

Matthei Aubel, who was in London, England, at the time of the coup, returned to Chile in early 1974 to assume command of the Academia de Guerra de la Aviación (AGA), which military authorities were using at the time as a detention and torture center. Alberto Bachelet—punished for his ties to Allende—was one of the people being held and interrogated there. As a result of the abuse he suffered, Gen. Bachelet died on March 12, 1974, just six weeks after his old friend Matthei Aubel was placed in charge of the AGA.

Matthei Aubel, now 88, claims he had only nominal authority over the Academy in general and no say about the particular facilities that were used to house and torture prisoners. Human rights lawyer Eduardo Contreras insists otherwise. On July 26, just as the Alianza was finalizing Evelyn Matthei’s presidential candidacy, Contreras filed a court motion accusing Matthei Aubel—now a retired general—of responsibility for Gen. Bachelet’s death. The lawyer, who represents the victims group Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos (AFEP), filed a similar motion last year.

Matthei Aubel says he has a clear conscience. "Accusing me of having some sort of involvement in the death of my friend, Gen. Bachelet, is just as grotesque as accusing Bachelet of treason, which is what they charged him with at the time," the retired general recently told CNN Chile. "It’s just grotesque. What else can I say?"

Ex-President Bachelet and her mother Angela Jerio have collaborated closely with AFEP through the years but do not support Contreras’ efforts to pursue Matthei Aubel. Last year, Jerio publicly defended the aged military man. "Gen. Matthei has always been our friend," she said. "I admire him, and I am certain that he was not in the Academia de Guerra at the time my husband was there."

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