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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Chile’s Once And Future President Michelle Bachelet Wins Election Runoff In A Landslide

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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If ever there was a case of victory foretold, this was it. On Sunday, Dec. 15, former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010)—the hands-down favorite long before she even announced her candidacy—completed her re-election bid with relative ease, besting her rightist rival Evelyn Matthei by nearly 25 percentage points in Chile’s presidential runoff election.

Bachelet, 62, made history eight years ago when she beat current President Sebastián Piñera to become the country’s first female head of state. With her 62% to 38% triumph over Matthei, Bachelet’s name will now go down in the history books again—this time as the first president since Chile returned to democracy in 1990 to win a second term in office.

"I’m proud to be your president elect. I’m proud of the country we have but even prouder of the country we’re going to build," Bachelet told supporters shortly after her win was announced. "We will carry forward the deep transformations that Chile requires, and we’ll do so with responsibility."

Enduringly popular

The victory capped a dominant run that began in many ways four years ago, when Bachelet left office with a more-than-80% approval rating but, because of Chile’s electoral laws, was unable to seek immediate re-election. Chilean presidents can hold office multiple times but are barred from serving back-to-back terms.

The then governing Concertación coalition, represented instead by former President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), was unable to capitalize on the outgoing leader’s popularity. Frei narrowly lost the 2010 election to Piñera of the conservative Alianza (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010). Piñera’s victory was the first for the Alianza, which represents the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI). The center-left Concertación, a four-party bloc formed in the waning days of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), had previously won four straight presidencies.

Even at the outset of the Piñera presidency, polls predicted that Bachelet—should she choose to run again in 2013—would restore power to the left. The ex-president was nevertheless careful to stay clear of the political spotlight. Soon after leaving office she accepted a high-level post with the UN, spending most of her time abroad and keeping media contact to a minimum. Despite—or perhaps because of—her distance from the daily ins and outs of Chilean politics, Bachelet’s popularity persisted. Survey after survey hailed her as the nation’s favorite political figure, supercharging the ex-leader’s eventual candidacy with a level of momentum that ultimately proved unstoppable.

Bachelet’s chances were boosted further still by the Alianza’s initial inability to settle on a rival candidate. A pair of financial scandals sank the governing coalition’s first choice, Laurence Golborne, a charismatic Cabinet minister under Piñera (NotiSur, May 10, 2013). His replacement, UDI veteran Pablo Longueira, bowed out for mental-health reasons, forcing the governing coalition
to eventually settle on Matthei (UDI), who served as President Piñera’s labor minister (NotiSur, Aug. 9, 2013).

The Alianza’s indecision raised the possibility that Bachelet might be able to avoid a runoff—something no candidate has managed since 1993. She fell just short of that goal, winning last month’s crowded first-round election easily (she finished 22 percentage points ahead of Matthei, her closet challenger) but failing to capture the 50% majority needed to claim the presidency right then and there (NotiSur, Nov. 22, 2013).

No doubt a disappointment for Bachelet and her many supporters, the candidate’s narrow miss in the Nov. 17 vote did not, in the end, prove to be much of a setback. Bachelet’s head-to-head with Matthei was rich with story lines: much was written about the intertwining personal histories of the two women, who reportedly played together as children before the 1973 military coup drove a tragic wedge between the two families (NotiSur, Sept. 20, 2013). But it was never much of a contest. Just as the pundits predicted, Bachelet beat her Alianza rival soundly.

"It’s clear. She won, and I congratulate her," Matthei, even before the vote totals were tallied, said on Sunday night. "Everyone in the country knows this candidacy wasn’t something I sought out. But never, either out of convenience or fear, could I have shied away from the challenge."

**Challenges ahead**

Four years after finally winning control of the government, the Alianza will now have to resume its familiar opposition role. Adding insult to injury was the margin of defeat. In past losses, the conservative coalition had at least been within reach, finishing seven percentage points behind in the 2006 runoff and just three percentage points behind in 2000. This time the Alianza was simply crushed.

Clearly down, the political right is not, however, out. In parliamentary elections, held the same day as last month’s first-round presidential contest, the Alianza coalition won enough seats to maintain a viable albeit diminished presence in Congress. As such, it will have an important say-so when it comes to some of the more far-reaching reforms Bachelet is promising. The incoming president will have to negotiate with the right or else scrap some of her plans altogether.

Bachelet will also have her hands full trying to satisfy her wide range of political allies. The president-elect kicked off her campaign with a promise to represent a nueva mayoria (new majority). The slogan resulted in a rechristening—and leftward expansion—of the Concertación, which includes the Partido Socialista (PS), Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD), and Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC).

Plagued by cohesion problems even before Bachelet left office, the center-left coalition fared even worse afterward (NotiSur, May 4, 2012). It struggled in particular with how to respond to a series of massive student-led protests, which took center stage starting in 2011. The frequent demonstrations took a major toll on President Piñera, whose approval ratings dipped to historic lows (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011). Public support for the Concertación fell lower still.

Segments of the far-left, in contrast, were energized by the protests and by the star status afforded student leaders like Camila Vallejo, a member of the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh). Vallejo, along with a handful of other former student leaders, went on to win a seat in the Chamber of Deputies in the November parliamentary elections. Four years ago, the PCCh had no representation...
in Congress. Starting in March, it will have six seats. "The dictatorship snatched away the representation the people had given us," fellow student-leader-turned-deputy Karol Cariola told reporters last month. "Forty years after the coup, we are recovering that representation."

Upon returning to Chile in March, Bachelet—eager to tap into the energy unleashed by the student movement—swung left with promises to revamp Chile’s education system and work toward replacing the country’s dictatorship-era Constitution (NotiSur, April 19, 2013). Her policy pivot had the desired effect: the PCCh, the most established of Chile’s far-left parties, agreed to join the Nueva Mayoría and thus partner with the Concertación. Sen. Alejandro Navarro’s leftwing Movimiento Amplio Social (MAS), a Concertación breakaway group, climbed on board as well, as did a startup faction called the Izquierda Ciudadana (IC).

Forming an election coalition is one thing, especially when the candidate at the fulcrum is almost guaranteed to win. Maintaining a broad governing bloc is another matter altogether. Some on the left are already keeping their distance. Third-place finisher Marco Enriquez-Ominami, who took home 11% of the vote in the nine-candidate first-round election, refused to endorse Bachelet in the second, marking his ballot instead with an "AC," short for Asamblea Constitucional. Enriquez-Ominami is part of a growing movement demanding an assembly be convened to draft a new Constitution. The PCCh and other far-left Nueva Mayoría factions might also be inclined to break with Bachelet if her promised reforms fail to materialize or are too slow to take shape. Depending on how the president’s political program progresses, today’s allies could easily become tomorrow’s critics.

A cautionary tale

Bachelet’s return to power has raised high expectations from interest groups and among the general public as well. Some voters are perhaps nostalgic for the days of her first administration. Others are hoping the president-elect—as her campaign pitch seemed to suggest—will be more independent and reformist than she was the last time around.

Of particular interest to many Chileans is how Bachelet handles the issue of education. As a candidate, she echoed the student movement’s demand of "free quality education" for all. "Education is a social right, not a consumer good," she said. "Why should it depend on what someone can afford?"

Starting in March, when she officially replaces Piñera as president, Bachelet will be expected to turn those words into action. Failure to do so could spark a backlash in the form of new student-led demonstrations. "Our hopes lie with the strength of social movements, not in the next government," Melissa Sepúlveda, the recently elected president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), told the biweekly Argentine newspaper Perfil. "I’m optimistic in that I believe the movement has the ability to think deeply about the education we want in Chile. Students aren’t just demanding that schools be free. We want a total transformation of the education system."

Students, environmentalists, union workers, indigenous activists: Chileans took the streets for a variety of causes and in a number of different locations during the past several years. In early 2011, residents in the far-southern region of Magallanes protested a government decision to lift natural gas subsidies (NotiEn, February 2011). Indigenous activists, in the meantime, clashed with police on Easter Island (NotiSur, Feb. 18, 2011). In Santiago and Valparaíso, tens of thousands demonstrated
later that year to protest the government’s approval of HydroAysén (NotiSur, June 10, 2011 and NotiEn, July 2011), a controversial hydroelectric project slated for the southern Aysén region, which saw its own wave of violent protests in early 2012 (NotiSur, March 16, 2012)

Together the various outpourings of popular frustration caused irreparable damage to Piñera’s presidency, sending his approval rating plummeting and obscuring his accomplishments, which include four years of solid economic growth. Bachelet will need to be careful if she wants to avoid the same fate.

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