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President-Elect Michelle Bachelet Announces Cabinet Choices

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After routing the right in December’s runoff election (NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013), President-elect Michelle Bachelet now faces the considerable challenge of turning her broad campaign coalition—a loose affiliation of center-left and left parties known as the Nueva Mayoría—into a viable governing bloc.

The incoming leader took her first major step toward that goal late last month, introducing a Cabinet chosen to appease her traditional power base while at the same time reach out to her more recently acquired allies, namely the far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) and Izquierda Ciudadana (IC).

The latter, formed less than two years ago, will have its first Cabinet post in the person of IC party president Víctor Osorio, who was tapped to head the Ministerio de Bienes Nacionales. Bachelet chose a member of the PCCh, Claudia Pascual, to lead the Servicio Nacional de la Mujer (SERNAM). Pascual, 41, will be Chile’s first Communist Cabinet minister since 1973, when Chile’s then PCCh-aligned Socialist President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) was toppled in a bloody military coup.

In addition, the president-elect designated a significant number of political independents, including economist Luis Felipe Céspedes as head of the Ministerio de Economía. The ministries of health, social development, housing, agriculture, mining, transport and telecommunications, sport, and culture will also be led—starting March 11, when Bachelet officially takes the reins of government—by officials with no party affiliation.

Keeping the Concertación close

And yet, when it came to the government’s most influential Cabinet posts, Bachelet drew from her political core, selecting card-carrying members of the Concertación, a four-party coalition she represented during her first term as president (2006-2010). Formed in the waning days of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), the Concertación governed Chile for two decades before losing the 2010 election to President Sebastián Piñera of the conservative Alianza coalition. The Concertación ties together the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Socialista (PS), Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), and the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD).

Chile’s new interior minister, the second-most-powerful government official after the president, will be Rodrigo Peñailillo of the PPD. A relatively fresh face in Chilean politics, Peñailillo, 40, has worked closely with Bachelet since her first run for the presidency, nearly 10 years ago. The president-elect also chose PPD members to head the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (Heraldo Muñoz) and Ministerio de Educación (Nicolás Eyzaguirre).

PRSD party president José Antonio Gómez, a senator and former presidential candidate, will serve as justice minister. Gómez held the same post between 1999 and 2003, serving in the administrations of Presidents Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) and Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006).
Bachelet chose a member of her own party, 48-year-old economist Alberto Arenas of the PS, to head the Ministerio de Hacienda. Arenas, who served as budget director during the president-elect’s first term, will be tasked with drafting a major tax-reform scheme that, in theory at least, will generate an estimated US$8.2 billion in additional revenue during the coming five years. Bachelet will need that money to make good on another key campaign pledge: education reform. As a candidate, she promised that, by the end of her term, the state would provide free education to 70% of Chile’s most economically disadvantaged students. Six years after that, if all goes according to plan, education costs will be covered for all students.

The incoming government’s official spokesperson, Álvaro Elizalde, also hails from the PS. The ministro secretario general de gobierno, as Elizalde will officially be known, held a minor post in Bachelet’s previous administration. More recently he served as head of communications for her campaign team.

The centrist DC, once the Concertación’s dominant member party, will be represented in the Ministerio de Defensa (Jorge Burgos), the Ministerio Secretaría General de la Presidencia (Ximena Rincón), and Ministerio de Obras Públicas (Alberto Undurraga). Burgos, a deputy in Congress, is a political veteran who served as undersecretary of the interior in the Lagos administration. Rincón, a senator, also worked under Lagos (as the intendente, or regional governor, for the Santiago metropolitan region) as did Undurraga, who was head of the Servicio Nacional del Consumidor (SERNAC). Undurraga was later elected mayor of Maipú, a populous outlying district of Santiago.

Questioning Bachelet’s commitment

If the Nueva Mayoría’s various member parties were frustrated about how Bachelet chose to divvy up the various Cabinet posts, they tried not to show it. "This is my government, and I’m going to support all the ministers, without distinction," PS head Osvaldo Andrade told the daily La Tercera in response to a question about whether his party—which happens to be the president-elect’s party —felt disappointed by its relatively limited representation. "It’s not a question of numbers," he said.

The governing Alianza, which represents the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and center-right Renovación Nacional (RN), also tried for the most part to play nice. "Congratulations to Jorge Burgos," Chile’s outgoing Defense Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter wrote via Twitter. "He’ll do very well. And all the best to the other appointees as well."

Bachelet’s Cabinet unveiling did, however, draw some vocal complaints from student leaders, both past and present, who were quick to question her choice for education minister. Nicolás Eyzaguirre has an impressive resume. He earned a doctorate at Harvard University in the US, has worked at different times for the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—most recently as its Western Hemisphere department director—and served as finance minister during President Lagos’ entire six-year term. Eyzaguirre, 61, is also an accomplished classical guitarist. But "he isn’t someone directly linked to the world of education," Melissa Sepúlveda, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), the key student organization, told reporters. "He’s better known for his ties to the business world."

Sepúlveda and others involved in Chile’s student-led education-reform movement had even more to say the following week, when Bachelet announced her choice for education undersecretary: Claudia Peirano. Unlike Eyzaguirre, Peirano does have experience in education—as part-owner
of a private consultancy that receives taxpayer money to provide services to public schools. She is also on record as opposing the student movement's call for free higher education. Peirano took that position in 2011, at the height of Chile's turbulent education-reform movement (NotiSur, July 22, 2011).

Deputies-elect Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, and Gabriel Boric—former student leaders who won congressional seats in last November’s parliamentary elections (NotiSur, Nov. 22, 2013)—all sounded off on Peirano, saying, among other things, that her appointment represents a serious conflict of interest. "Claudia Peirano’s track record and public opinions point in the opposite direction from the mandate that the people gave to the government of the Nueva Mayoría," said Vallejo.

On Feb. 4, exactly one week after she was named to the post, Peirano opted out of the job. Her replacement is Valentina Quiroga, an advisor who helped design then candidate Bachelet’s education platform. Peirano is not the first education official to suffer at the hands of Chile’s exacting student leaders, who managed to get three different education ministers sacked in just the past four years (NotiSur, May 10, 2013).

**The ties that bind**

Bachelet cannot expect to please all of her many political allies all the time. It hardly comes as a surprise that her various appointee decisions—especially at the undersecretary level—would ruffle some feathers. Questions have also arisen, for example, regarding Bachelet’s choice for undersecretary of the armed forces, Carolina Echeverría Moya, whose father, an Army colonel during the Pinochet dictatorship, has been linked to human rights abuses. Another appointee, the future undersecretary for social services, is also drawing fire—for his proximity to a past financial-mismanagement scandal.

Of all the controversies, however, the early frustration with Bachelet’s education choices may be the biggest cause for concern. Her promises to heed student demands—to "move toward universal free education on all levels," as she said during the campaign—were in large part what allowed the "new majority" to coalesce. For that same reason, the Nueva Mayoría coalition could break apart should Bachelet fail to follow through.

For now, the student movement and its allies in the far left have decided to give the president-elect the benefit of the doubt—despite her long association with the once-politically dominant Concertación, which did little during its long run in power to address the cost and quality problems that have hampered Chile’s education system for decades. Patience could wear thin, however, if the reforms Bachelet is promising do not materialize.

"The Nueva Mayoría is still in the process of being built," Carlos Vásquez Órdenes, an academic with an education degree from the Universidad de Chile, wrote in a recent El Mostrador opinion piece. "It worked as far as the election was concerned, and it was capable of coming up with a platform. But it has yet to earn its place among our country’s cultural-political traditions." The coalition’s current state, Vásquez went on to say, brings to mind the "sublime" words of the Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos: "When the old refuses to die and the new is slow to be born; that, my friends, is when you get a crisis. And that’s what we need to overcome."