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Chilean President Michelle Bachelet Uses “Sober™” May 21 Address To Outline Far-Reaching Agenda

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President Michelle Bachelet’s first three months in office have been marked more by deeds than discourse. The center-left leader has already submitted a bill to overhaul the national tax system and another to do away with Chile’s much-maligned parliamentary election rules, and she has proposed a handful of education reforms. In May, she traveled to Argentina. The month before, she coordinated responses to not one, but two natural disasters: a powerful April 1 earthquake in the north followed two weeks later by a devastating firestorm in the port city of Valparaíso (NotiSur, May 23, 2014).

But after walking the walk, Bachelet finally had a chance last month to do some talking as well. On May 21—when, as tradition dictates, Chilean leaders present their annual State of the Nation address—the recently returned president took to the pulpit to review her early accomplishments and spell out her goals for the next four years. Delivered in a style that was neither fiery nor audacious, Bachelet’s two-hour speech made the case, nevertheless, for what is one of the boldest presidential programs in memory.

"We must acknowledge that we haven’t been able to overcome the huge inequalities that affect us nor do away with the privileges and abuses that occur in various areas of our lives," the president said. "Today the citizens demand that we take action and resolve the problems and that we do so with changes that allow us to face the challenges of this new Chile."

Chief among those challenges, the president explained, is improving the country’s education system. In 2006, when Bachelet began her first term as president (2006-2010), she dedicated approximately 6% of her May 21 address to education-related issues. She had twice as much to say on the subject this time around. "Receiving a quality education is the most effective mechanism for reducing inequality. Education is a social right that must not depend on the economic resources of the students or their families," the president argued.

**Student protests**

Students have been complaining for years about serious structural problems in Chile’s education system (NotiSur, July 22, 2011). Markedly inconsistent as far as quality is concerned, schools are also, in some cases, prohibitively expensive, particularly at the university level. Some of those institutions operate as for-profit businesses. Critics also lament the government’s decision—during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990)—to decentralize control of the nation’s public schools, which have since been administered at the municipal rather than national level.

High school students took to the streets in 2006 in what was dubbed the revolución de los pingüinos (the penguin revolution), so named for the black and white uniforms worn in Chile’s public secondary schools (NotiSur, June 23, 2006). A second major student uprising occurred five years...
later, this time led by influential university organizations such as the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), which organized months of massive rallies in Santiago and in other Chilean cities (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011, and Sept. 23, 2011).

Calling for nothing short of a complete overhaul of the system, student leaders like Camilla Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, and Gabriel Boric (who have since been elected to Congress) put then President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), a conservative, squarely on the defensive. The movement also had a huge impact on the recent presidential elections, not only by drawing support away from the political right but by pushing Bachelet—the frontrunner throughout the process—further to the left. Upon entering the race in March 2013, Bachelet said the "rage" expressed by students and other groups that mobilized during the Piñera presidency was "justified" (NotiSur, April 19, 2013). She described Chile’s income breach as "ethically and politically unacceptable" and promised to forge a "nueva mayoría social" (new social majority).

Structural reforms

The tone of her May 21 address was far more subdued. Analysts described it as "sober" and "conciliatory." She spoke repeatedly about Chile’s strengths and accomplishments and made no mention whatsoever of the "nueva mayoría," as Bachelet’s broad coalition of political allies—previously known as the Concertación coalition—has since been rebranded. Her language was "without rhetorical emanations, ornaments, or excesses," political analyst and Universidad Diego Portales administrator Carlos Peña explained in a recent El Mercurio column.

And yet the content of Bachelet’s speech—the actual proposals she put forth—was consistent with the far-reaching reform agenda she promised as a candidate. The three pillars of her program, the president explained, are education reform; tax reform, which will be needed to pay for the education overhaul; and a new Constitution. Chile’s Constitution was drafted and implemented during the Pinochet regime. The democratic governments that have led the country since 1990 made numerous changes to the dictatorship-era document. Nevertheless, "it still generates profound distrust," Bachelet said. "We don’t want that to be the foundation on which our political system is built."

The recently returned president has pushed Congress on some of those changes already. In April her administration introduced a bill to eliminate one of the most controversial—and politically intractable—elements of the Constitution: the binomial majoritarian system used for electing parliamentary representatives. The system encourages political balance in the legislature by making it extremely difficult for a single coalition to win both seats in a given congressional district. To do so, the coalition’s candidates must not only finish first and second in the voting; together, their vote total needs to double that of their two opponents (NotiSur, Feb. 10, 2012). The result has been an overrepresentation by the political right, which, not surprisingly, has resisted attempts to modify the rules.

Bachelet also submitted legislation that, if approved, will cut state funding to for-profit schools, phase out the fees parents pay for certain public schools, and eliminate the use of entrance exams in the country’s top-tier public kindergarten and primary schools. During her May 21 speech, she also promised to build 4,500 public day-care centers during the next four years, present legislation to "demunicipalize" the public school system, and gradually increase funding to universities so that, eventually, students will be able to attend them cost free. "If education is a right for all, then we
must pay for it with public resources and not with the sacrifices of families, especially not the most [economically] vulnerable ones," she said.

**Tax bill tussle**

To make good on those promises, Bachelet will need cooperation from Congress. She'll also need money, which is where the tax-reform bill she unveiled on March 31—just two weeks after assuming office—comes in. The legislation, which has already cleared the Cámara de Diputados, or lower house, would increase corporate taxes (from 20% to 25%) and eliminate an institutionalized loophole called the Fondo de Utilidades Tributarias (FUT), another dictatorship-era innovation that, according to The Economist, "allows companies indefinitely to defer payment of some tax on their retained profits." Together the various reform measures are expected to boost government coffers to the tune of US$8.2 billion annually.

The tax bill has set off alarm bells within the country’s business community. It has also drawn sharp criticism from the opposition Alianza coalition, a partnership between the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI). "The middle class will end up paying for this tax reform. It’s a reform that affects savings and hurts all Chileans," UDI leader Ernesto Silva said on May 1. "We hope that the government, instead of presenting videos that divide people and generate hate, will do something to generate a true debate."

Backers of the reform accuse the right of using misinformation to run a "terror" campaign. During her national address last month, Bachelet defended the tax bill and insisted it would hurt neither the middle class nor small businesses, as conservative critics claim. In what was perhaps her only overtly partisan jab at the right, the president called on her opponents to debate the issue "with respect, without engaging in false characterizations or misinforming the public about the real effects of the measures we’re proposing."

**Abortion debate**

Toward the end of her speech, Bachelet opened herself to further attacks from the right when she touched on the emotionally charged issue of abortion, which is prohibited in Chile under all circumstances, including in cases of rape or when a pregnancy puts the life of the mother at risk. Chile is one of only a handful of countries in the world to impose that kind of blanket ban on abortion. Most of those countries (Nicaragua and El Salvador have similar laws) are in Latin America (NotiCen, Feb. 25, 2010, and May 30, 2013).

"Periodically we hear stories in the news about women who undergo clandestine abortions that put their lives at risk and, without a doubt, mark them with an experience of pain and anguish," Bachelet said. "Chile has to face this reality by opening an immediate, mature, and informed discussion and by taking up a debate in parliament on a measure to decriminalize voluntary abortion in rape cases, when the mother's life is in danger, or when the fetus is not viable."

Members of the Alianza have promised to fight tooth and nail against the proposal, which is also opposed by Chile’s Catholic Church leadership. On May 26—five days after Bachelet’s speech—a group of some 3,000 pro-life protestors gathered in front of the presidential building (La Moneda) in Santiago. The group was joined by several conservative lawmakers, including Deputy Gustavo Hasbún (UDI). "These types of projects are trying to legalize the death penalty for innocent children and find the easy way out," Hasbún told El Mercurio.
Bachelet's proposal was also criticized by her predecessor, ex-President Piñera. "We should protect life and the dignity of all unborn children," he opined in a May 21 Twitter post. "We do not have the right to decide who lives and who dies."

Opinions are divided even among Bachelet's political allies. One of the leading ministers from her first stint as president, Francisco Vidal, told reporters last month that, while he favors lifting the abortion ban for cases in which the mother's life is at risk, he does not believe there should be an exception for rape victims. Vidal served as Bachelet's official spokesperson and later as defense minister. He served as interior minister under President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006).

Others on the left, however, are urging the president to push forward with the issue. On June 3, former presidential candidate Marco Enríquez-Ominami—at times an outspoken critic of Bachelet—submitted a letter to La Moneda expressing his support for the initiative. "We've come here to try and convince the president not to be frightened off. There are other nonconservative forces out there who want this to be pursued," he told reporters. "This isn't a debate about values. That's just a trap. This is about the rights of Chilean men and women."

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