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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Second-Year Slide Continues for Chilean President Michelle Bachelet

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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After a soaring start, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet seems to have fallen prey to the same confidence-in-leadership crisis that her triumphant return to office, 16 months ago, was supposed to help resolve.

Hailed for years as an anomaly, a leader whose unique, soft-spoken brand of charisma inspired faith in a public that had otherwise grown disillusioned with the country’s post-dictatorship political system (NotiSur, May 4, 2012), Bachelet, 63, is now struggling to remain relevant. And, despite repeated attempts to hit the proverbial reset button on her flagging presidency, her popularity problems appear, if anything, to be getting worse. The president’s approval rating is down, at last count, to a paltry 26%, according to a June survey by the polling firm GfK Adimark. Only 22% of Chileans back the job her administration is doing. And just 18% support her center-left Nueva Mayoría coalition.

The conservative opposition, however, isn’t faring any better. Only 13% of respondents to the GfK Adimark survey said they approve of the right-wing Alianza coalition, down from 18% in May and 34% in March 2014, when Bachelet began her second nonconsecutive term as president. Congress is even more unpopular, with approval numbers of just 16% and 14%, respectively, for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Questioning the model
Public frustration with the leadership, on both sides of the political spectrum, has been exacerbated in recent months by a cluster of coinciding corruption scandals (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015, and April 24, 2015), including one involving Bachelet’s son, Sebastián Dávalos, who is accused, together with his wife, of using insider information and privileged connections to orchestrate a lucrative land deal. Another corruption inquiry, Caso Penta, resulted earlier this month in a house-arrest order (that has since been lifted) for one of the opposition’s most recognizable figures, former senator Jovino Novoa of the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI).

The confidence crisis, nevertheless, predates the system’s suddenly publicized probity problems. Bachelet’s conservative predecessor, ex-President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) of Renovación Nacional (RN), the UDI’s partner in the two-party Alianza, was equally unpopular during much of his term. And, just as the rightist Alianza is faring poorly now despite widespread disapproval of the left-leaning president, the center-left, then known as the Concertación, scored consistently low approval numbers during the conservative Piñera administration (NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2011).

Piñera’s most obvious problem was a student-led reform movement that coalesced in 2011 with a wave of massive and widely supported protests (NotiSur, July 22, 2011, and Aug. 19, 2011). Organizers called for deep structural reforms to the country’s education system, which was partially privatized during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) and placed under municipal, rather than state, control. They lamented the inconsistent quality of the nation’s schools...
and rising tuition costs, particularly at the university level, and demanded "educación gratuita y de calidad" (cost-free and quality education).

Students were joined by other interest groups, mostly on the left, making the case that the free-market reforms forced into place by the Pinochet regime benefit the country in grossly imbalanced ways. While a handful of people, the billionaire Piñera being a prime example, make heaps of money, a large swath of the population does not. And without access to good schools, quality public health care or decent housing—which exist in Chile, but only for those who can afford them—the poor have little hope of improving their lot.

**Big promises**

During their time in power, Piñera, with his Forbes-listed personal future, and the conservative Alianza, given its ideological affinity with the Pinochet dictatorship, were particularly vulnerable to arguments of this kind.

But people also blamed the Concertación, which governed the country for two decades (1990-2010) following Pinochet’s departure. The center-left coalition introduced various social programs, made a number of amendments to the country’s dictatorship-era Constitution, which remains in place, and challenged deeply conservative social mores by passing legislation, for example, to finally legalize divorce (NotiSur, Dec. 17, 2004). But it did nothing to dismantle the dictatorship’s overall economic structure.

As a candidate in 2013, Bachelet promised to change all that. During her first term in office (2006-2010), the president faced her own student uprising (NotiSur, June 23, 2006). She responded with various band-aid measures that ended the protests but did nothing to resolve the education system’s overall problems. Having learned her lesson, Bachelet said that this time around she would tackle the heart of the matter—just as the student groups demanded—and revamp the entire structure. Chief among her pledges was to ensure cost-free university for all who need it (NotiSur, April 19, 2013).

Bachelet also promised tax and labor reforms, raised the possibility of replacing the Constitution, called for changes to the country’s wholly privatized pension system, and pledged an end to the unusual binomial majoritarian system (NotiSur, Feb. 10, 2012), another Pinochet-era legacy, that Chile alone used for electing members of Congress.

Enthusiasm for the returning president’s ambitious reform agenda ran high. Student groups offered their tacit support, while left-wing political parties such as the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCCh) joined Bachelet’s camp in a formal way, allowing her to expand the Concertación leftward. Rechristened as the Nueva Mayoría, the coalition proved to be formidable come election time. Bachelet romped in the December 2013 runoff, winning 62% of the vote (NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013).

**Another Cabinet change**

Turning the electoral bloc into a viable governing coalition, however, has proven easier said than done, as evidenced by tensions on display during the lead-up to last year’s tax overhaul, the first of Bachelet’s major reforms (NotiSur, Aug. 8, 2014). Left-wing sectors in the Nueva Mayoría supported the reform, but only reluctantly because of various concessions Bachelet made to the center and right.
Complicating matters even more for Bachelet are an ongoing economic slowdown (the government recently downgraded its 2015 growth forecast from 3.6% to 2.5%) and the aforementioned corruption scandals, which began taking a major toll on the president in February, when the allegations involving Dávalos first went public.

Bachelet responded in late April by promising an array of anti-corruption and probity measures. She also promised to begin a "constituent process," a national dialogue of sorts, to replace the country’s Pinochet-era Constitution. Days later, she carried out a major Cabinet reshuffle, sacking five ministers and shuffling another four into new positions (NotiSur, May 29, 2015).

One of the few Cabinet members allowed to keep his job was Nicolás Eyzaguirre, the education minister, who enjoyed a privileged position given the central role education reform plays in Bachelet’s agenda. But on June 27, he, too, was reassigned.

Eyzaguirre now serves as the president’s chief of staff, filling a position vacated 20 days earlier by Jorge Insunza, who resigned (just weeks after taking the job) following revelations that he did consultancy work for mining companies while serving as a legislator and presiding over a mining-focused congressional committee. Eyzaguirre’s replacement as education minister is Adriana Delpiano, a former Santiago intendente (appointed regional governor) and close personal friend of former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006).

The decision to remove Eyzaguirre came nearly a month into a partial and ongoing teachers strike, which the Colegio de Profesores, Chile’s professional teachers association, launched in opposition to government-proposed changes to the teaching profession (NotiSur, June 26, 2015). The strike, accompanied by various street demonstrations, also helped energize student organizations, which are ramping up pressure on Bachelet to make good on her education-reform promises.

A gradual approach

Bachelet made yet another attempt to start anew on July 10, when she led a nearly 10-hour Cabinet meeting that began as something of a pep rally but ended with a controversial mea culpa.

Inspired, apparently, by Chile’s July 4 victory (on home soil) in the Copa América soccer tournament finale—the country’s first-ever title in a major international tournament—the president likened the remaining two and one-half years of her term to "the second half" of a match. "This game is being played right now," she told her ministers. "It’s not an easy game, but we must win. … I’m not one to give up."

She then, however, called on her team to prioritize and essentially scale back their goals for the coming years. The administration, Bachelet said, needs to be "realistic" and take into account various problems it faces regarding public support, its own management shortcomings, and fiscal restraints because of the economic slowdown.

"We know we’re not going to have all the revenue we’d originally expected to be able to advance our program and answer new social demands," the president said. "It will be necessary to prioritize and act more gradually on some aspects of our commitments."

Backers of the president praised her for being sincere and reasonable regarding her agenda. But for many on the left, Bachelet’s "second-half" talk sounds a lot like "throwing in the towel," as a recent opinion piece published by the online news site El Mostrador described it.
"Using the excuse that there’s no money represents the worst kind of politics," two-time presidential candidate and Partido Progresista (PRO) founder Marco Enríquez-Ominami told reporters. "It means the government made promises without bothering to carry out the reforms necessary to turn its promises into reality."

Former student leader turned PCCh congresswoman Camila Vallejo spoke out against Bachelet’s apparent strategy shift as well. In an interview with the daily La Tercera, she acknowledged that fiscal revenue is necessary to fund social programs, but said that in the case of education reform, the government can and ought to redistribute money from elsewhere in the budget. Vallejo also said that Bachelet’s approach is likely to contribute to, rather than alleviate, the confidence-in-leadership crisis.

The government "shouldn’t be putting [these reforms] in doubt. Because the ambiguities just end up heightening mistrust," the Communist deputy said. "If there are doubts about the resources needed to guarantee cost-free education, then they need to look for that money elsewhere and redistribute it. Education isn’t an expense, it’s an investment. We can’t lose sight of that."

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