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With wins in Central Santiago and other high-priority comunas (districts) in the capital, Chile’s conservative opposition gained ground in recent municipal elections at the expense of the governing Nueva Mayoría coalition, which faces an uncertain future as its struggling leader, President Michelle Bachelet, limps toward her final year in office.

A large majority of eligible voters chose not to participate in the Oct. 23 elections. Abstention stood at 65%, a post-dictatorship record. Those who did go to the polls expressed a slight preference for the rightist Chile Vamos coalition, which edged past the center-left Nueva Mayoría in mayoral votes won (38% versus 37%) while ousting pro-government incumbents in several emblematic municipalities.

The biggest prize was Central Santiago, where Felipe Alessandri, of the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) party, beat the incumbent, Carolina Tohá, a close ally of Bachelet. The RN is one of two principal parties in Chile Vamos, alongside the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI). The coalition also includes two smaller parties, Evópoli and Partido Regionalista Independiente (PRI).

Conservative candidates beat Nueva Mayoría incumbents in the greater Santiago comunas of Ñuñoa, Maipú, and Providencia as well. Providencia, a populous middle-class district just east of downtown Santiago, was won by Evelyn Matthei (UDI), Bachelet’s rival in the 2013 presidential runoff (NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013). Matthei beat Josefa Errázuriz, a former community organizer who became a darling of the left after the last municipal elections, in 2012, when she unseated Cristián Labbé (UDI), a retired colonel who served dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) as a member of the regime’s secret police (NotiSur, Nov. 16, 2012). Labbé had governed the key comuna for 16 years.

Overall, Chile Vamos won 144 mayoralties, up from 121 in the 2012 elections, and three more than the governing coalition, which saw the number of municipal governments it controls drop from 167 to 141. Not exactly a right-wing revolution, the results were widely viewed, nevertheless, as a defeat for the multi-party Nueva Mayoría and for Bachelet, whose approval rating stands at 20%, according to an early November survey by the polling firm Cadem. “Chile has spoken, both inside and outside the ballot box,” the president said after the election. “The government coalition has lowered its level of support in several places. We need to heed the warning signs.”

The results also provide a timely boost for Chile Vamos and its hopes of regaining control of the government—most likely with former President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) as its standard-bearer—in next year’s presidential and legislative elections. Polls show Piñera as an early frontrunner for the presidential contest, which will take place Nov. 19, 2017, with a second round of voting, if needed, a month later. Chile’s term-limit laws prevent Bachelet, who also served as president from 2006 until 2010, from seeking immediate reelection.
“This shows that residents are tired of incomplete promises,” Central Santiago’s mayor-elect, Felipe Alessandri told the Reuters news agency. “Citizens have made their annoyance at the old practices of politicians clear, and they have made clear that they expect to be listened to.”

Cohesion problems

The October elections are the latest setback in what has been a difficult road for the Nueva Mayoría, which Bachelet formed four years ago by inviting the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) and two smaller left-wing factions into an alliance with the four-party Concertación coalition, made up of the Partido Socialista (PS), the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD) and the Partido por la Democracia (PPD). The Concertación governed Chile for two decades following the return to democracy in 1990 but lost in the 2010 election to Piñera.

After dominating in the 2013 presidential and legislative elections, Bachelet and the Nueva Mayoría pushed through several major reforms, including an overhaul of the country’s tax system (NotiSur, Aug. 8, 2014). The government’s soaring start was grounded, however, by a series of corruption scandals, including one that involves Bachelet’s son, Sebastián Dávalos (NotiSur, April 24, 2015). Approval numbers for the president and her coalition tumbled. Complicating matters is an ongoing economic slowdown and more recently, large street protests by citizens demanding an end to the country’s mostly privatized pension system (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2016).

Little wonder, then, that voters decided to “punish” the government, as many analysts argue, by leaning right in the municipal elections. “This was a likely and predictable scenario,” Marco Moreno, dean of the political science department at Santiago’s Universidad Central, told the independent news site El Mostrador. “This was a punishment vote against the current government. That’s how the people who voted expressed themselves, by voting against Nueva Mayoría candidates... I think that starting tomorrow, because of these results, relations within the Nueva Mayoría will be trickier.”

Moreno’s words proved to be prescient, particularly with regards to the PCCh, which raised hackles among the coalition’s other member parties by refusing, in early November, to back a government proposal on public-sector wage hikes. Tempers flared, with the PCCh leader, Guillermo Teillier, telling reporters at one point, “If someone is determined to kick us out of the Nueva Mayoría, they should say so right now.”

Low turnout

More than a few analysts point to Piñera, a veteran politician, billionaire businessman, and probable consensus candidate for the right, as the obvious beneficiary in all this. “Most likely Bachelet will end up, once again, handing power over to Sebastián Piñera,” columnist and Universidad Diego Portales rector Carlos Peña wrote in a post-election opinion piece published by the daily El Mercurio.

Others, however, aren’t so quick to write off the left’s chances or declare Piñera’s quest for reelection a done deal. A closer look at the numbers suggests that while the results weren’t good for the Nueva Mayoría, they weren’t disastrous either. In mayoral contests, Chile Vamos only beat the governing coalition by approximately 70,000 total votes, analyst Juan Pablo Luna noted in an article for the Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), a non-profit organization and investigative news portal. And with regards to city council positions, the Nueva Mayoría actually came out ahead,
winning 53.9% of the 2,240 seats nationwide and 47% of all votes cast, sociologist Raúl Zarzuri pointed out in a piece for El Mostrador. The right, in contrast, won less than 40% of city council votes.

The results should also be read with caution given the historically low voter turnout. Only a third of eligible voters participated in the process. Where the other 65% lies on the political spectrum is anyone’s guess. Also unclear is whether—or how—those would-be voters can be coaxed into participating in next year’s presidential and legislative contests.

“Chile has entered into the group of countries that suffer this phenomenon, like in Colombia, where the plebiscite [to approve a government-guerrilla peace deal] lost not because the ‘No’ option won, but because abstention won. It was the same thing in England with the Brexit,” said the Universidad Central’s Marco Moreno (NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016).

**New actors**

Another noteworthy aspect of the elections was the relative success of independent candidates. Together, independents won 17.4% of the mayoralties and upped their vote haul by nearly 220,000 votes compared to 2012, Luna noted. The increase is particularly impressive given that the overall number of voters in this year’s municipal elections was down more than 850,000 compared to four years ago.

The biggest showstopper among independents was Jorge Sharp, a 31-year-old lawyer and veteran of the 2011 student movement, who was elected mayor of Valparaíso, an important coastal city. Sharp won 54% of the vote, beating the conservative incumbent, Jorge Castro (UDI), as well as a Nueva Mayoría-backed candidate. “This beautiful afternoon in Valparaíso signals the end of the duopoly,” the mayor-elect said in reference to the decades-long domination of Chilean politics by the Chile Vamos and Nueva Mayoría coalitions, previously known as the Alianza and Concertación, respectively. “Today sees the emergence of a new political and social force, led by decent citizens and independent from the [traditional] parties.”

There has already been talk that Sharp, who represents a group called Movimiento Autonomista, could join forces with other former student leaders and left-wing independents to form a so-called frente amplio (broad front). A movement of that kind could split the left, further boosting the right’s chances of winning back the presidency. But it could also energize it, perhaps by drawing further support to someone like Alejandro Guillier, an independent senator and former radio and television journalist who is beginning to generate serious buzz as an alternative to the Nueva Mayoría’s other leading candidate, former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006).

“We need to put new actors on the stage,” Pedro Miranda, a 64-year-old Valparaíso restaurant manager, told the British daily The Guardian. “Otherwise we’re definitely going to have the same, which is exactly what we don’t want.”