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Chilean President Doubles Down on Reform Push in Final Cuenta Pública

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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President Michelle Bachelet assured her place in history in 2006 when she became Chile's first and only female head of state ([NotiSur, March 17, 2006](#)). She left office four years later with a record-high approval rating (above 80%), served a stint as head of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and then cashed in her bountiful political capital for a second term as president, winning the 2013 election in a landslide.

Since then, however, the president's star has lost much of its shine. Corruption scandals, a sluggish economy, and intra-coalition cohesion problems caused her approval numbers to plummet, dipping at one point below the 20% mark. And yet, when it's all said and done—when Bachelet, 66, leaves office next March and retires from politics, as she promises—what she'd most like to be remembered for isn't the glass ceiling she broke through years ago, or her triumphant return to power in 2014, but her turbulent second term.

That, at least, was the message the center-left leader tried to convey in her latest Cuenta Pública, an annual state-of-the-nation speech that, for nearly a century, Chilean presidents delivered on May 21 but was moved, starting this year, to June 1. Why the second term? Because it was only upon returning to the power, Bachelet explained in her more than two-hour address, that she and her allies in the broad Nueva Mayoría (New Majority) coalition began pushing for real, root-level reforms aimed at reducing Chile's gaping inequality numbers. And while the task has been messy and largely unpopular, it was also necessary and long overdue, she argued.

"When I traveled around the country as a candidate, or when my [second] term began, I saw a Chile that was struggling to modernize and was proud of its accomplishments," the president said. "But it was also a tense and impatient [country], a Chile of unjust contrasts ... a Chile that hadn't done enough to do away with the huge inequalities that dragged it down."

She said no country in the world had achieved that level of development with such high levels of inequality. "It wasn't sustainable," she said. "What was needed were foundational changes ... That's the task I undertook as president and that I'm here to talk about before the full Congress, before my fellow citizens, and before history. I say this with humility but also resolve: We've had the courage to tackle these challenges. We've taken on issues that hadn't been dealt with before. Issues like a new Constitution, tax reform, ending the binomial [voting system for members of the legislature], corruption, free [education], de-criminalizing abortion."

Neo-liberal 'vestiges'

That Bachelet would use the occasion to defend and try to frame her legacy is hardly surprising. Just as a president's first state-of-the-nation speech is a chance to lay down plans and spell out an agenda ([NotiSur, June 20, 2014](#)), the final Cuenta Pública is a natural time to look back and highlight accomplishments.

But as more than a few analysts noted, the president's June 1 address was surprisingly forward-looking as well. She promised to submit a bill, for example, to allow same-sex marriage. "Old prejudices shouldn't be stronger than love," Bachelet said. She also insisted that in the coming months, Chile would finally ease its hyper-strict abortion law, which prohibits the practice in all circumstances, even if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or puts the mother's life in jeopardy. A bill she presented two-and-a-half years ago to allow certain exceptions to the blanket ban is under consideration in the Senate. It cleared the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Chilean Congress, in March 2016 ([NotiSur, April 8, 2016](#)).

In an interview with the daily *Publímetro Chile*, political analyst Roberto Munita said Bachelet's talk about future projects diverts attention from what, in his opinion, is a rather limited list of actual accomplishments. "Unfortunately, with regards to achieved goals, Bachelet's [list] doesn't have much to say," he argued. Munita also said that by dwelling on policy issues that have no chance of being resolved in what remains of her term, the president is simply passing the buck to her successor.

Others, however, see Bachelet's focus on the future as a calculated political play, a way to influence the terms of debate as the country gears up for presidential and parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for Nov. 19. A presidential runoff, if necessary, would take place Dec. 17. The political commentator Tomás Mosciatti hailed the speech as a "great victory" for Bachelet, a refreshing display of force from a leader who, "after a long time, came out defiant, sure of herself."

"She accomplished what she wanted: to start dismantling the 'neo-liberal model,' the implementation of reforms for which there's no going back," Mosciatti—using language Bachelet herself employed in a May 31 interview with the Spanish new agency EFE—said in a video commentary for *BioBioChile*. In her interview with EFE, the president talked about removing "vestiges of the neo-liberal model."

A call for cohesion

Chilean presidents are constitutionally barred from serving consecutive terms. Upon completing her first period as president, therefore, Bachelet had to wait four years before running again. Her successor was Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), a billionaire businessman and political conservative who is hoping to win his own second term in this year's election. Polls have him as an early frontrunner in a crowded field that also includes independent senator and former news anchor Alejandro Guillier, the leading center-left candidate ([NotiSur, April 7, 2017](#)).

Bachelet returned to the presidency in 2014 with serious momentum and a solid majority in the legislature. She got off to a solid start, notching up a series of policy victories, including a controversial overhaul of the tax system. She also did away with Chile's "binomial majoritarian" rules for electing member of Congress, a long-entrenched legacy of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) that helped ensure political parity and benefited the political right in particular ([NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015](#)).

Then, starting in early 2015, a series of corruption scandals—including one involving her son and daughter-in-law—grounded her soaring start. Her poll numbers sank precipitously along with her appetite for political risk ([NotiSur, July 24, 2015](#)). But as the finish line of Bachelet's second term nears, some analysts now see evidence of a comeback. In a May 22 piece for the independent news site *El Mostrador*, Germán Silva Cuadra, a communications expert from the *Universidad*

Mayor in Santiago, suggested that Bachelet is on something of a public-relations hot streak and that she “looks more relaxed, in a better mood, even.” As a result, her approval numbers have risen to between 25% and 28%, which are higher than Piñera’s (24%). “In other words, without anyone realizing it, Bachelet has regained the pole position,” he wrote.

That, Silva Cuadra argued, could be good news for the struggling Nueva Mayoría coalition, which has been flailing since the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC) refused to join the other bloc members in backing Guillier for the November presidential election. The PDC decided instead to present its own candidate, Carolina Goic, a senator. The decision scuttled plans to hold a Nueva Mayoría primary.

The coalition is in desperate need of strong leadership, Silva Cuadra suggested. And who better to play that role than Bachelet, the woman who forged the Nueva Mayoría in the first place by bringing the Partido Comunista de Chile (Communist Party of Chile, PCCh) into an alliance with the now-defunct, four-party Concertación coalition?

“If she keeps bouncing back, Michelle Bachelet could play a role that was unexpected a few months ago,” he wrote. “The president could try to settle the bloc’s differences and outline a solution.”

Just over a week later, in her June 1 address, Bachelet tried to do just that with an explicit call for unity and loyalty among “progressive democrats.” More importantly, perhaps, was her clear and consistent emphasis on the structural reform agenda—the overhaul of the tax system, improvements to public health care and education, state-subsidized university education—that originally inspired and helped forge the Nueva Mayoría. She was careful to remind her allies, in other words, of their long-term goals.

“I know there’s still a long way to go. I know that consolidating and moving forward with these transformations will require time that goes beyond my government ... But the horizon toward which we’re moving is clear,” the president said. “We’ve started on this historic path, and we owe it to the country to complete it.”

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