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Governing Coalition 'Invisible' after Presidential Primaries in Chile

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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The race to replace Chile's outgoing president, Michelle Bachelet, is in full swing following a pair of primary elections—one for the conservative Chile Vamos (Let's Go Chile) coalition, the other for Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA), a recently formed leftist affiliation—that proved to be particularly propitious, most analysts agree, for the president's immediate predecessor, Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014).

As expected, Piñera, a billionaire businessman, won the Chile Vamos primary, held July 2, by a comfortable margin, netting 58% of the votes cast versus 26% for Manuel José Ossandón, an independent senator, and 15% for Felipe Kast, a deputy with the center-right Evolución Política (Political Evolution) party. Piñera is now the only rightist candidate going into Chile's presidential election, which takes place Nov. 19. A runoff, if necessary, would be held Dec. 17.

What did come as something of a surprise to most observers was voter turnout. Some 1.4 million people participated in the Chile Vamos contest, roughly 600,000 more than in the coalition's last primary, in 2013. Piñera alone received more votes than the right's 2013 primary candidates—Pablo Longueira and Andrés Allamand—combined. Enthusiasm for the process was all the more unexpected given that it coincided with a major soccer match, the final of the Confederations Cup tournament in Russia between Chile and Germany.

"Our candidacy goes well beyond Chile Vamos. It's for all Chileans of good will," Piñera told supporters that night. "Those who competed today were opponents. Those who will compete in November are our adversaries. And the enemies we want to defeat are poverty, crime, and low pensions."

Piñera is hoping to repeat the success he enjoyed in the 2009-2010 election, when he beat former President Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994-2000) of the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC) to become Chile's first conservative leader since dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) ([NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010](#)).

Election rules barring incumbents from immediate reelection kept Piñera out of the 2013 contest, which the center-left Bachelet—herself a former president (2006-2010)—won in a landslide ([NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013](#)). The two competed against each other directly in 2005-2006, when Bachelet beat Piñera in a runoff to become Chile's first woman president ([NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2006](#)).

Hoping for more

Voter turnout was significantly lower for the other presidential primary held July 2. Fewer than 330,000 people took part in the process to choose a candidate for the Frente Amplio, an alliance of left-wing factions that was formed just six months ago by veterans of the student-led education reform movement of 2011-2012. Radio journalist Beatriz Sánchez won 67% of the votes cast, easily beating her sole challenger, sociologist Alberto Mayol.

Sánchez has become something of a social media sensation since announcing her candidacy for president earlier this year. Polls have her running third overall behind Piñera and Alejandro Guillier, an independent senator and former television newscaster who is backed by most of the parties in the governing Nueva Mayoría (New Majority, NM) coalition. Survey results released July 3 by the polling firm GFK Adimark estimate support for Sánchez at 13%, just two percentage points behind Guillier but well off the mark scored by Piñera (31%).

“The Frente Amplio is here to stay,” Sánchez said after winning the primary. “Today marks the start of a new stage in Chile’s political history. The stage in which there were just two blocks is over ... We’re beginning to compete for power. And we’re competing for real. They know it, and they’re scared of us.”

The candidate’s tough talk contrasted with what most analysts saw as a disappointing result for the FA as a whole. Turnout was well shy of the 500,000-voter target that coalition leaders had openly set for themselves. And in low-income areas, participation was particularly low. In the Araucanía, the poorest of Chile’s 15 regions, turnout for the FA primary was only about a seventh of what it was for the Chile Vamos contest.

“The Frente Amplio urgently needs to correct this socioeconomic bias, which right now is being reflected in the polls,” political scientist Mauricio Morales of the Universidad de Talca told the news site *Diario Uchile*. “In the latest CEP [Centro de Estudios Públicos] survey, 14% of upper-income respondents said they’d vote for Beatriz Sánchez compared to just 1.6% among lower income people. Right now, the Frente Amplio isn’t representing the low-income left, but rather a more sophisticated [left].”

‘Categorical mistake’

Still, the “big loser” in the July 2 contests, analysts argued, wasn’t the FA, but the governing Nueva Mayoría coalition, which didn’t hold a primary this time around and missed out, as a result, on an opportunity to gain valuable exposure and much-needed momentum. Instead, while the Chile Vamos and FA candidates were out campaigning for their respective primaries, participating in televised debates, and doing interviews with media outlets, the center-left NM was largely invisible.

“The NM’s decisions led us to disappear from the map for several weeks. The cost of our errors is plain to see,” José Miguel Insulza, a former head of the Organization of American States (OAS) who briefly considered his own run for the presidency, said in a July 3 Twitter post.

The NM was formed in the months leading up to the last presidential election as a union between the four-party Concertación coalition, which governed Chile for two decades before losing to Piñera in 2010, and a handful of leftist groups, mostly notably the Partido Comunista de Chile (Communist Party of Chile, PCCh). The original Concertación parties are the PDC, the Partido Socialista (Socialist Party, PS), the Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (Social Democratic Radical Party, PRSD) and the Partido por la Democracia (Party for Democracy, PPD).

As an electoral alliance, the NM proved to be formidable, not only propelling Bachelet back into office but also giving her a substantial majority in Congress. Since then, though, it has been beset by cohesion problems that reached something of a breaking point in April, when former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006) decided to drop out of the race and the PDC—the coalition’s most conservative member party—announced that its preferred candidate, Sen. Carolina Goic,

would compete directly in the November election rather than face off against Guillier in a primary ([NotiSur, June 16, 2017](#)).

“It was a categorical mistake not to participate in the primaries, but it was unexpected,” political analyst and historian Andrés Cabrera told the independent news site *El Mostrador*. “When Ricardo Lagos dropped out, I don’t think there was an awareness of what the consequences would be, that [the NM] wouldn’t have a primary. Afterwards, when it became clear that the Frente Amplio and Chile Vamos would hold primaries, they started to worry.”

Skeletons in the closet?

Piñera’s performance in the Chile Vamos primary—and the even better poll numbers he’s likely to see in the coming weeks—should give the governing coalition even more cause for concern. The conservative candidate also has the advantage of running, from here on out, unopposed on the right.

The NM, in contrast, will have two candidates in the general election: Goic and Guillier, who’ll spend the coming months competing not just against each other, but also against Sánchez. Also running on the left is Marco Enríquez-Ominami, a former lawmaker who is barely registering in the polls but has plenty of campaign experience, having run in the past two presidential elections, both times scoring in double digits ([NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009](#), and [Nov. 22, 2013](#)).

“Piñera got a gift from heaven in that the Nueva Mayoría didn’t participate [in the primaries],” election campaign specialist Carlos Correa told *El Mostrador*. “In addition, there’s Piñera’s practical platform, with its focus on growth, a message that appeals to more than just the hard right.”

Still, with four months of campaigning ahead, the election is far from decided, particularly if the contest goes to a second round. Since the Pinochet dictatorship ended in 1990, the left has won five of Chile’s six presidential elections, and can be expected to come together, however belatedly, behind whoever emerges from the first round of voting. Guillier is confident that there will be a runoff, and that it will be between Piñera and himself. He also has reason to believe that Sánchez, with whom he shares a progressive outlook and a journalism background, will eventually and willingly endorse him.

“The dispute is going to very much what’s expected: Sebastián Piñera and Alejandro Guillier. We’ll be the ones in the big fight,” the senator told reporters shortly after the primary results came in.

Piñera could also be hampered by questions over conflicts of interest, offshore accounts, and undeclared assets, issues that have surfaced regularly in the press and that Guillier and others on the left will be eager to exploit in the coming months. One of the scandals hounding the former president involves a Peruvian fishing company called Exalmar, in which one of Piñera’s companies, Bancard, invested during his presidency ([NotiSur, April 7, 2017](#)). Exalmar holds fishing rights in a vast area of coastal waters that were awarded to Peru as part of an International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision handed down in early 2014, shortly before Piñera left office ([NotiSur, Feb. 28, 2014](#)).

The less-than-transparent line separating Piñera’s dual careers as a leading politician and business mogul seemed to be of minor importance to participants in the Chile Vamos primary. They are committed conservatives who are determined, analysts say, to avoid another leftist government at all costs. But in a general election, the corruption specter—just as it did for Bachelet following revelations two years ago of a questionable land deal involving her son and daughter-in-law—could prove costly.

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