

Chilean Elections: Future Promise and Past Pain

When former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London last October, his supporters predicted dire trouble in Chile. Political instability was inevitable, they said. And to prove their point, right-wing members of Congress temporarily stayed away from sittings, arguing that they couldn't possibly work under the circumstances.

But real trouble never materialized, and Pinochet—although still chafing at the bit under London house arrest—gradually slipped out of the headlines. That left the way clear for the political parties to concentrate on campaigning for the December 12 election, in which Chile will choose its president for the next six years.

Since democracy was restored in 1990, Chile has been governed by a center-left coalition—the Concertación—made up of the centrist Christian Democracy, the Socialist Party, the left-wing Party for Democracy, and the smaller Radical and Liberal parties. Brought together in the 1980s by the struggle to topple Pinochet, the coalition has proved a lasting alliance, far more robust than the right-wing opposition would have liked. Led first by Patricio Aylwin (1990-94) and then by Eduardo Frei (1994-present), both Christian Democrats, the coalition has delivered a mixture of gentle social reform and, until the Southeast Asian economic crisis, high growth. Despite a recent dip in popularity, it stands a good chance of securing a third term of office.

The Concertación governments have not substantially altered the free-market economic model of the Pinochet regime. However, they have tried to smooth some of its rough edges by tightening regulation of the private pension-fund system, increasing spending on the badly neglected public

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health system, and setting in motion a major overhaul of state education. Since 1990 prosperity has increased by leaps and bounds, bred by the structural reforms of the 1980s. Per capita income has almost doubled, the business neighborhoods of Santiago have filled with opulent glass-and-marble office blocks, and even the roads—always a blot on Chile's copybook—have improved, thanks to a private concessions program.

But many voters still feel shortchanged by the Concertación. For example, the Pinochet government's labor legislation remains in place, severely limiting collective bargaining and the right to strike. And although growth reduced the percentage of the population living in poverty from 39 percent in 1990 to 22 percent last year, income distribution has worsened slightly.

Most important, the Concertación has failed to reform the restrictive political structure inherited from the military government. By placing 9 non-elected senators, 4 of them chosen by the armed forces, in the 47-seat upper house, the constitution has deprived both Concertación governments of the elected majority that they otherwise would have enjoyed, thus clipping their legislative wings and, crucially, stopping them from reforming the constitution itself. This failure has fuelled voter frustration and helped to discredit politicians and the government. The butt of public criticism is Congress itself which, its power to initiate legislation severely curtailed by the 1980 constitution, still languishes in the port of Valparaíso, to which it was banished by Pinochet.

The Government Coalition's Bid for New Mystique

The result of this frustration has, predictably, been increased electoral abstention. For the 1997 congressional elections, one million young voters out of a potential electorate of nearly nine million simply did not register, while a surprising 18 percent of votes cast were spoiled or blank.

But despite the disappointment with the Concertación, its presidential candidate, Ricardo Lagos, does well in the opinion polls, regularly taking as much as a 10-point lead over his nearest rival, right-wing candidate Joaquín Lavín. In one of the latest polls, taken in April, Lagos was favored by 38 percent to Lavín's 29 percent. And Lagos's position is believed to have strengthened significantly since then. On May 30 he took the Concertación's official nomination, winning a primary election by a margin that surprised even his own aides. Running against Christian Democrat senator Andrés Zaldívar, he took 71 percent of the vote, apparently receiving the support even of some Christian Democrat voters.

Lagos, a moderate Socialist Party member, is often described as Chile's

Tony Blair. His first priority is, he says, macroeconomic stability and market-driven growth. But that does not mean he is happy with trickle-down economics. Instead, he offers positive discrimination for the underprivileged, arguing that areas such as education and health cannot be left entirely to market forces without widening the imbalances in opportunity and damaging social cohesion. That platform takes some wind out of the sails of other presidential candidates, including Communist Party general secretary Gladys Marín and Green leader Sara Larraín, who nevertheless will chip into Lagos's vote from the left. Both could take around 5 percent in December, forcing a second-round runoff between Lagos and Lavín, though Lagos is expected to win any runoff comfortably.

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One of Lagos's main challenges in the run-up to the election is to keep Christian Democrat supporters behind him. That party is in disarray after Sen. Zaldívar's humiliating primary defeat, and its right wing could become a hunting ground for Lavín. The Christian Democracy is Chile's largest political party, with just over 100,000 members. It took 1.3 million votes in the 1997 congressional election, giving it almost the same weight as the four other Concertación parties together. Although its left wing wholeheartedly supports Lagos, the Christian Democracy's right wing, especially at grassroots level, has never felt comfortable with the Socialists. The party came to prominence in the 1960s as an alternative to the wave of Marxism that swept Latin America, but it may now be on the verge of a terminal decline, dragged down by an older generation of leaders who have failed to make way for newcomers and are increasingly out of touch with today's electorate. Some analysts believe that, if this happens, the party's left wing could merge with the other four Concertación parties, turning the coalition into a political party in its own right.

The Right's Bid for the Center

Lavín, the main right-wing candidate, represents the extreme right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI) party and the slightly smaller, more moderate National Renewal (RN) party. He is proving a more successful candidate than many analysts anticipated, and his record shows he is capable of surprises, as in the 1996 municipal election, when he was elected mayor of Santiago's Las Condes district with a remarkable 78 percent of the vote.

However, the December election will bring tough odds for Lavín. Still in his early 40s, he is almost 20 years younger than Ricardo Lagos and looks the zealous local government official. By contrast Lagos, who has been a minister in both Concertación governments, has the authoritative air of an elder statesman.

In Chile, the right traditionally takes no more than a third of the vote. If Lavín is to have a chance in December, he has to break through this ceiling, capturing independent-center votes and, possibly, disgruntled grassroots support among the Christian Democrats. But his ties to the military dicta-

torship, of which he was a fervent supporter, make him taboo for many voters who are old enough to remember his past. Lavín is, in fact, a member of the UDI party, which groups together the dictatorship faithful. To shake off the past and capitalize on public disenchantment with politicians, however, he is presenting himself as a nonpolitical candidate—one with-

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out close party ties who looks at issues on their merits.

This sleight of hand means that he tends to concentrate on practical, nonpartisan issues, giving the impression, as befits a former mayor, that he is more at home on local matters, like traffic patterns or street lighting, than with broader political issues. It also means that, while Lagos can cash in on publicity for events organized by all the Concertación parties, Lavín is loathe to share UDI and RN platforms and has to generate his own lime-light. An orthodox free-market economist, Lavín has a populist streak, which fits his focus on everyday issues and gets him publicity but which adds to his air of being a political lightweight. When unemployment rises, he is photographed eating in a soup kitchen; when Chile's Indian communities complain, he attends the celebration of the Mapuche New Year; and wherever he goes, aides distribute Polaroid shots of the candidate with his voters.

By looking at issues on their merits, Lavín occasionally clashes with the parties that support him. This happened, on one particularly tense occasion, when he visited the families of the “desaparecidos”—those who were arrested by the Pinochet regime's secret police and never reappeared again. His problem is that the UDI and RN parties, still tied to the legacy of the dictatorship, have failed to evolve into a modern, liberal right. Former RN leader Andrés Allamand tried to push his party in this direction but lost the battle after a crushing defeat in a race for a Santiago Senate seat in 1997. The party is now controlled by hardliners, its liberal wing reduced to a tiny minority.

The government coalition intends to get maximum mileage out of the

tension between Lavín and his parties. A new government bill calling for a plebiscite on the 1980 constitution, which stands little chance of becoming law by December, aims to put the cat among the pigeons by pitting Lavín, who claims to support constitutional reform, against the right-wing parties, which are ambiguous on the issue.

2000 Onward

Lagos's main challenge, if he becomes Chile's next president, will be to break through the constitutional stalemate that has dogged the Aylwin and Frei governments. According to Lagos, Chile cannot continue to live under a constitution that divides rather than unites it.

The next congressional elections, due in 2001, are key in his plan for clearing this hurdle. Unlike President Frei, who took power in 1994 but didn't have congressional elections until 1997, Lagos hopes that in 2001 his government will still be riding high on a wave of popularity, enabling it to get the votes he needs. In addition, he is actively courting young voters, whom he hopes to charm back into the political fold.

Relatively new issues, including the environment and the rights of Chile's Indian communities and other minorities such as gays, promise to come to the fore during the next government. The 1997 congressional elections provided some early signs of the potential power of these issues when, for example, Party for Democracy deputy Guido Girardi campaigned almost exclusively on environmental issues and was returned with a 66 percent majority.

Lagos's campaign team, in an attempt to avoid vote seepage to Sara Larraín, includes people with close ties to the green lobby. And to the Mapuche Indians—who traditionally vote right wing—he is offering twice as much new land as they received from the Aylwin and Frei governments, as well as assistance in using that land productively and positive discrimination in education.

But before Chile can look forward, it still has to bury its past properly. After the Aylwin government's Rettig Truth Commission reported on the dictatorship's human-rights violations, naming victims but not culprits, the issue almost disappeared from the political agenda. But Pinochet's arrest in London and the hopes of justice that it has raised in Chile have shown that time alone is not enough to heal the wounds.

It now seems unlikely that General Pinochet, who will bring with him the fraught issue of whether he can and should be tried by Chilean courts, will return to Chile before December. Lavín presumably hopes not, for Pinochet in Chile would be too close a reminder of the past that Lavín wants to for-

get. Lagos would like to have him back now, probably preferring not to be saddled with the Pinochet problem himself.

But whatever happens to Pinochet, there is a growing consensus across the political spectrum—apparently including the navy and the air force, if not the army—that the families of the just over one thousand “desaparecidos” deserve to know what happened to their relatives and, if possible, where they are buried.

The Frei government, aware of the political risks, is shy of taking an active role in solving the problem of the “desaparecidos” despite the fact that success would be an important feather in its cap. But either this government or the next will have to grapple with the nation’s history before Chile will be fully free to move forward.