Chilean Socialist Party candidate backtracks on abortion policy

Mauricio Saavedra
23 December 1999

One feature of the presidential election campaign in Chile has been the Socialist Party candidate Ricardo Lagos' backtracking on abortion. "I am not planning to legislate on abortion of any sort," Lagos said after a private discussion with Catholic priests three weeks before the first round of voting on December 12.

Four years ago, Socialist (PS) deputy, Fanny Pollarolo, said upon returning from the 1995 United Nation's International Women's Summit in Beijing: "The victims of abortion are all women from poor backgrounds. This is a public health threat, which highlights the inequalities in our society. We need to revise the law, which not only forces women to risk their lives, but also sends them to prison.

"[The Socialist Party] is in favor of legalising abortion. We believe abortion is an issue of conscience, and in a pluralistic society like ours, the state should not intervene in that decision. Abortion should only be penalised when it is carried out against the woman's will."

What is to explain the retreat? In part, the PS was desperate to gain support from the Catholic Church and take sufficient votes from the rightwing, pro-Pinochet candidate Joaquin Lavin to win Sunday's poll. Lagos, who is running for the incumbent Concertacion coalition with the Christian Democrats, will say almost anything to assume the presidency.

His private discussion with the Catholic hierarchy was a sign of concern over Lavin's growing support. Lavin, from the Independent Democratic Union, is closely associated with the former military junta, top business bodies, the Catholic Church and other arch-conservative sections of Chilean society.

Lagos' comments are also part of a wider shift to a more reactionary social policy. Interviewed by *El Mercurio* newspaper on December 4, Lagos sounded like any member of Lavin's right-wing coalition, the Alliance for Chile, as he responded to a series of questions.

"The death penalty—do you believe in it?"

"I respect the law and as president I would carefully consider every (death penalty) case that comes to me. It's not a problem of beliefs; it's in the law."

"Beatings—would you prohibit them by law?"

"I would instruct my ministers to avoid them..."

"Homosexuals—would you legislate in their favour?"

"Respect for human beings doesn't depend on laws.

"Who would you come down on the hardest?"

"Crime in every form."

Chile is one of only 17 countries that still prohibit all forms of abortion. Both voluntary and therapeutic abortions are banned, even where a pregnancy is due to rape or incest. According to lawyer Lidia Casas, an abortion "is prohibited even where the woman's life is endangered".

Since 1967 the political establishment has borrowed from the lexicon of Catholicism to brand abortion and homosexuality as sinful crimes. The law recognises them as sex-related criminal acts and they fall in the same category as rape, incest and sexual abuse.

Women who have abortions can be jailed for up to five years and practitioners for three years. About 50 people, mostly poor women, are prosecuted each year. In 1993 women convicted for having an abortion accounted for 2.3 percent of the nation's prison population. Chin Chin prison in southern Chile currently holds 22 women prisoners jailed for abortion-related offences.

In 1996 Lidia Casas carried out a survey on 132 women who were indicted for abortions performed between 1977 and 1994. All were from poor backgrounds.

© World Socialist Web Site

At the same time, Chile has the highest rate of abortions in Latin America and one of the highest in the world. At least 200,000 illegal abortions are performed every year.

The anti-abortion laws do not affect women from the middle and upper classes who can afford to pay fees of up to US$2,500 for a safe, low risk procedure.

The remaining women, in particular those from working class families or single mothers, pay $200 for extremely dangerous operations to be carried out by backyard operators using primitive rubber probes and wires.

An estimated 30,000 women are hospitalised and 100 die a year from infections related to abortion complications. Had they been properly treated in modern clinics without fear of prosecution, they would have been saved from injury and death.

Most abortions are carried out due to economic hardship. Women, many of them single parents, account for one fifth of all breadwinners in Chile. Because half do not complete secondary school they are forced into the worst jobs—the minimum wage is $US178 a month.

In effect these laws, defended by Lagos, directly target women from the poorest sections of society who usually have no other choice than abortion.

Another major factor is that sex education programs and information are non-existent. Despite the fact that 81 percent of boys and 77 percent of girls in Chile have their first sexual experience before the age of 17, only 485 secondary schools in Chile offer any sort of sex education. As a result, 15 percent of pregnancies are to teenage girls. About 40,000 women aged 20 or less give birth each year.

In June this year, Sergio Zorilla, director of the Center of Bioethics and Public Health of the University of Santiago, told a conference on the lack of health programs for women: “Chile lives a social and political anomaly, in that even though it has over 70 universities, the right to information and programs about sexuality is so underdeveloped that the lack of discussion leads to sanitary catastrophes."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site