

Rightwing could form government in Chile after presidential election

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18 December 1999

Presidential elections in Chile have, for the first time since General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, raised the possibility of rightwing parties forming the government. This state of affairs follows nine consecutive years of rule by the Socialist Party and Christian Democrats.

In the first round of voting last Sunday, the Socialist Party (PS) leader, Ricardo Lagos, running for the ruling Concertacion (coalition) ended with 47.9 percent, only 30,000 votes more than his rightwing opponent, Joaquin Lavin who obtained 47.5 percent. Four other candidates received a combined total of 4.5 percent. Since both Lagos and Lavin fell short of a 50 percent majority, a run-off ballot is scheduled for January 16.

Lavin celebrated as though he had won the elections. "I now feel I am the representative of one half of the Chilean population," he declared. Lavin, the candidate for the umbrella group the Alliance for Chile, obtained the highest vote the right has received in electoral history.

If he does win the election in January he will be the first president of the extreme right to rule since Pinochet, under whom he worked as an advisor.

Lavin would bring to power his own ultra-nationalist group, the Independent Democratic Union, whose members and supporters include former junta officers, secret police agents and admirers of the Spanish fascist leader Franco, as well as fascistic groups such as Fatherland and Liberty.

Of eight million registered voters, only seven million people cast ballots on December 12. The other million invalidated their cards or stayed home. The two presidential hopefuls will now try desperately to gain the support of these non-voters in the month-long campaign before the run-off.

"For me, the first job is to call on the million who did not vote (to tell them) that democracy is worth the trouble and please take part," Lavin said.

Lagos appeared stunned by the results. "We expected more, without doubt, and we will work among those who abstained, cast invalid votes, or blank ballots," he said.

The Stalinist Communist Party leader, Gladys Marin

conceded that she was ready to negotiate with Lagos, but "only when the Concertacion (coalition) abandons its defence of the neo-liberal model and considers a change in its program, making concessions to workers". Lagos rejected the condition. As in the past, Marin may soon drop the provision and openly support the ruling Concertacion.

The Stalinists received only 3.16 percent on election day, 30 percent less than the last election six years ago. Since the fall of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Marin's party has suffered a major political rout.

An issue rarely discussed in the media was the overwhelming disenchantment with the political establishment among workers and youth, even though this was vividly expressed throughout the election campaign.

Besides the million people who cast invalid votes or stayed home, only 8,084,476 registered for the election. This was less in both relative and absolute terms than in the 1993 presidential election when 8,783,123 registered. At least 1.4 million young people between 18 and 24 did not enroll this year.

Media interviews indicated that many who did vote were skeptical of all the candidates. "I am going to vote for Lagos," a voter said, "though to tell you the truth, none of the candidates are totally convincing."

People recognised that Lagos' and Lavin's virtually indistinguishable populist promises of more jobs, more housing, an end to extreme poverty and health reforms, were made only for electoral purposes.

Another fundamental factor was that both candidates avoided any discussion about Pinochet's detention in Britain and the crimes committed by his regime.

Lagos, in particular, steered clear of the issue, despite Lavin's close relations with Pinochet, who stands accused of crimes against humanity. Pinochet's regime murdered thousands of people, including countless members of Lagos' own party.

But before and after the results on Sunday, Lagos made no mention of Pinochet and instead adopted Lavin's pledge to "promote unity and avoid confrontation among Chileans".

The incumbent coalition lost ground in all of Chile's 13 regions.

In northern Chile, where mining and other export-oriented industries are located, the Concertacion lost Iquique to Lavin and lost ground in Antofagasta, Atacama and Copiapo. Since the 1940s, these areas have been considered bastions of the so-called left parties, supported by miners and seasonal workers, which make up the majority of the population.

The Concertacion lost support in Punta Arenas, once another PS stronghold. Punta Arenas, 2,200 km south of Santiago, is predominantly a farming and fishing zone. Since the Concertacion took power 10 years ago the region's economy has grown only 1 percent, compared to 6 percent in the capital.

Perhaps more significant were the results from Valparaiso and Santiago, the two most populous regions in Chile.

Santiago is where a third of the population, or five million people are concentrated. While there are pockets of extreme wealth, the overwhelming majority live in the slums and shantytowns (poblaciones) that encircle the city centre.

In the last two presidential elections the Concertacion had the backing of a substantial majority, but last Sunday Lagos managed to win by a mere 8,036 votes.

The coalition also paid dearly for the social crisis it has created in Valparaiso, the largest port and the second most populous centre.

Earlier this year, students, workers and shopkeepers joined a regional demonstration against the government's privatisation of the ports and the highest unemployment levels in the country—16.1 percent, with 30 percent youth joblessness.

In the 1993 presidential elections the Concertacion had a 30 percent margin over the right coalition in Valparaiso. On December 12 it lost the city by 6 percent, or 52,000 votes.

For 17 years the country lived under Pinochet's brutal dictatorship. Thousands were tortured, executed and killed, or disappeared. Many more were expelled from the country. The dictatorship also imposed an economic "shock therapy", which forced at least half of the population into extreme poverty.

The Concertacion leaders used these factors to win the allegiance of the working class and youth. They promised to find the disappeared, punish the military for its crimes and relieve the economic hardship.

In reality the PS and Christian Democrats (PDC) cemented a political and economic order with the military, based on accelerating the free-market economy and protecting the armed forces.

A referendum ended Pinochet's rule in 1988 and the Concertacion took office in 1990 on a wave of popular support. The PDC's Patricio Aylwin, the first post-coup

president, rested on approval ratings of more than 70 percent.

Yet, as the civilian regime continued to protect the military and defend the economic interests of the wealthy few, while suppressing those of the working class and youth, its support rapidly diminished.

Approval ratings for the second Concertacion president, Eduardo Frei, plummeted to only 28 percent this year. Two factors dominated: discontent with the administration's defence of Pinochet against the Spanish courts and a severe economic recession, which plunged thousands into poverty.

Last Sunday, despite the official position of the PDC leadership, a substantial layer of Christian Democrats rejected Lagos and supported Lavin. Only last May, during the Concertacion's primary elections, the PDC, faced with Frei's loss of credibility, backed Lagos over its candidate, Andres Zaldivar.

After Sunday's vote, Lagos made a specific appeal to those in the PDC who backed Lavin. Addressing himself to them, he said: "Today a chapter has been closed but history has not ended. I am a democrat and I have heard the voice of the people."

Last weekend's result is the product of nearly a decade of Concertacion rule, under which the military framework has essentially been left intact, honed and perfected for the needs of the wealthy elite.

International investors were not concerned by the populist pledges made by both candidates. "Regardless of whether Lagos wins or Lavin wins, the economic model is not going to change," said Cecilia Hatton, a research manager at Santiago brokerage.

ING Barings' chief economist, Arturo Porzecanski, commented: "No one feels strongly about the outcome of the election, the overall feeling is that neither would upset the apple cart."



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