

Socialist Party candidate narrowly defeats ex-Pinochet official in Chilean presidential poll

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Socialist Party (PS) leader Richard Lagos, the candidate for the ruling coalition in Chile, narrowly defeated Joaquin Lavin in the second round run-off of the country's presidential elections on Sunday. Lagos will head a new administration of the Concertacion coalition, which has been in government since 1990 when the former military dictator, Augusto Pinochet, relinquished power.

Lagos won 51.32 percent of the vote as against 48.68 percent for Lavin and his Alliance for Chile. The second round vote was necessary as neither candidate achieved the necessary 50 percent of the vote in December's first round. Lagos and Lavin were neck-in-neck in the first ballot, with just 30,000 votes separating them.

The elections revealed widespread disenchantment with both candidates. More than 10 percent of registered voters—900,000 out of 8 million—either cast an invalid vote or simply stayed home on January 16, even though voting is compulsory. In addition, some 1.4 million people, mainly young people, did not enroll before the deadline last August. Fewer voters were registered than in the previous presidential election in 1993.

More than 60,000 Lagos supporters celebrated at a victory rally on Sunday night. Even at this gathering the political problems facing Lagos soon became apparent. At one point the call went up from the crowd, "Pinochet must be sentenced!"—drowning out Lagos' victory speech and forcing him to pause. He could only respond with references to "protecting rights, respecting life, and in particular defending human rights" and a promise to abide by judicial inquiries in Chile against the ex-dictator.

The incident emphasises the gulf between the president-elect and his own supporters. Lagos is the

first PS president since Salvador Allende was deposed in Pinochet's 1973 military coup. But he has adamantly opposed Pinochet's extradition from Britain to Spain, and even suggested acting as the Chilean envoy following the arrest of the former dictator in Britain 15 months ago.

As the election drew closer, the media and the political establishment, including Lagos and Lavin, made concerted efforts to quash any reference to Pinochet. Both candidates avoided a discussion of the military dictatorship, its record of atrocities and the proceedings against Pinochet in Britain. Instead they appealed for national unity and reconciliation.

Despite Lagos' efforts to bury the issue of Pinochet, the shouts at the rally indicate the depth of sentiment against the military dictatorship. Many of the votes that enabled Lagos to scrape across the line in the second round came from those who in the first round voted for the candidates for the Chilean Communist Party and the Humanist Party, as well as a Green independent, all of whom support putting Pinochet on trial.

The alternative was Lavin, who had worked as an advisor to Pinochet in the 1980s and is a member of the Democratic Independent Union, a semi-fascist, ultra-nationalist group, whose members include ex-military officers and secret police agents.

Far from wanting to mete out justice to Pinochet and the military, Lagos made an open appeal in his victory speech for collaboration with the right wing. In the presence of Lavin, who turned up to embrace and congratulate the new Socialist Party president-elect, Lagos promised to "work together with those who yesterday were my adversaries. There is space for everyone. No one will be left out in Chile."

What little separated the two candidates' election promises in the months before December was

eradicated in the three weeks after the first round of voting. Lagos became indistinguishable from Lavin, even adopting the right-wing candidate's promise to be "tough on crime".

Lagos ran a TV campaign advertisement in which he pointed to delinquents and told them not to vote for him because he would be "relentless" against them. The following day he reiterated the message, saying, "There will be neither impunity nor hesitation."

Lagos also installed Soledad Alvear, the previous justice minister, as one of his election team leaders to demonstrate his commitment to law and order. Last year Alvear sought to introduce legislation to enable judges to impose jail terms on children as young as 14. She also tried to bring in harsher prison sentences and tougher criteria for appeals, parole and bail.

Before Sunday's vote, Lagos moved to reassure big business and the international markets that there would be no change from the pro-market policies of the previous Concertacion administration. He issued a public statement declaring that those he had previously nominated as his economic ministers, mainly from his own Socialist Party, would be replaced by a number of IMF-trained economists, specialists in privatisation who are known for their opposition to proposed changes to the country's draconian labour laws.

The fact that Lagos barely managed to defeat the right-wing Lavin is a political indictment of the record of the Concertacion coalition governments, which continued the free market economic policies of the Pinochet dictatorship and presided over declining living standards and growing social polarisation.

In the 1993 presidential election, the Concertacion candidate Eduardo Frei, a Christian Democrat, won outright in the first round with a majority of nearly 58 percent, the highest vote since 1931. The combined vote for two right-wing candidates was only 31 percent.

In this election Lavin not only came close to defeating Lagos, but won in areas that have traditionally been regarded as "left" strongholds. These included Iquique, a port city in northern Chile controlled by left-wing parties for decades, and Valparaiso, the largest port and the second most populous centre.

Surveys last year showed the ruling coalition with record low approval ratings on all major issues, particularly unemployment, poverty, crime and human

rights. Lavin exploited this disillusionment and hostility by making populist promises to create jobs and end poverty, as well as provide more housing and health care.

Whatever illusions remain in Lagos and the Socialist Party are likely to quickly evaporate as the new administration imposes the agenda of big business and embraces the right wing.

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