

Michelle Bachelet elected president

Socialist-Christian Democratic coalition retains power in Chile

Bill Van Auken
17 January 2006

Sunday's election victory of Michelle Bachelet, a leader of Chile's Socialist Party, has been widely reported as another indication of a "turn to the left" in Latin America. Much of the media attention focused on the 54-year-old pediatrician becoming the country's first woman president.

The essential political content of the election results, however, is that the Socialist Party-Christian Democratic coalition—known in Chile as the *Concertación*—which has exercised power in the interests of big business since 1990, will continue to hold the reins of state power.

There is no doubt that the so-called "social" issues featured prominently in the campaign, which saw the Chilean right's candidate, billionaire businessman Sebastian Piñera, run on a "family values" platform, attempting to contrast his traditional marriage and supposed religious piety with Bachelet's status as a single mother and her self-acknowledged agnosticism.

For its part, the Socialist Party modeled Bachelet's campaign on those of British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, emphasizing her personal qualities, while saying little about political program.

In this, the second round of the election, Bachelet defeated Piñera with 53.5 percent of the vote to his 46.5 percent. The billionaire attempted to appeal both to the extreme right—vowing to put an end to prosecutions of military personnel accused of mass killings, assassinations and torture under the dictatorship—and to the Christian Democrats, describing himself as a "Christian humanist" and distancing himself from former dictator Augusto Pinochet. In the end, he proved unsuccessful in straddling these contradictory appeals.

For masses of working people in Chile, the right

remains unalterably associated with the horrors inflicted upon the population during the 17 years of military dictatorship. In the more impoverished and working class areas, including the mining districts, Bachelet led by a significantly wider margin, while Piñera polled better in the wealthier districts of Santiago.

Bachelet's political evolution is emblematic of the steady shift to the right by the Chilean Socialist Party in the three decades since the overthrow of Socialist Party President Salvador Allende and the taking of power by General Pinochet in a 1973 CIA-backed military coup.

The daughter of an air force general who was tortured to death by the dictatorship for his close ties with the Allende government, Bachelet was herself arrested, together with her mother, and imprisoned in the infamous Villa Grimaldi detention center, where she too was tortured. After her release, she lived for more than five years in exile, first in Australia and then in East Germany.

After returning to Chile in 1979, she worked in a Swedish-financed clinic that treated the children of families that faced political repression and torture. In 1994, four years after the Socialist-Christian Democratic coalition first came to power, she was appointed as an adviser to the Minister of Health.

In 1996, however, her political career took a sharp turn. She began studies at the Chilean national war college and, a year later, was sent to Washington to attend the Inter-American Defense College. Upon her return, she worked in the Chilean Defense Ministry, while serving on the Socialist Party's commission on military affairs.

In 2000, with the election of President Ricardo

Lagos—the first Socialist to head the Chilean government since Allende—she was first appointed health minister and then defense minister. As the first woman to hold the latter post, she supervised one of the biggest buildups of the Chilean military in history and oversaw the deployment of Chilean troops to Haiti, where they are still participating in the “peacekeeping” force that relieved the US Marines who had invaded following Washington’s ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The military high command, with which Bachelet worked as minister, remains largely dominated by Pinochet’s allies. Out of 36 generals in the Chilean army, at least 13 were officers in the units that carried out the repression under the dictatorship, responsible for the “disappearances,” imprisonment and torture of tens of thousands of Chileans.

“I want my government to be remembered as a government for all,” Bachelet said after her victory was announced. The seemingly innocuous statement had more than one meaning. On the one hand, it echoed her election campaign rhetoric about seeking to better the conditions of the large section of the Chilean population, while, on the other, it was directed to the right and the sections of the ruling establishment that it represents, assuring them that she will protect their interests.

The president-elect vowed not to make any radical change from the free-market policies that were imposed upon the country through the crushing of the working class under the dictatorship and which have been continued ever since. She pledged to “walk the same road” as her predecessors and rebuffed suggestions that she might retreat from the sweeping privatizations that have been carried out over the past decades.

The so-called “Chilean economic miracle” has made Chile one of the most attractive “emerging markets,” generating huge profits for the multinationals and the country’s financial elite, but leaving huge sections of Chilean working people poor and unemployed. Alongside Brazil, Chile is one of the most socially unequal countries in the hemisphere.

The Wall Street markets reacted calmly to the Chilean election results. There is full confidence that the new administration will make no changes in the economic policies that have given foreign and domestic capital free rein. Moreover, for the more politically

conscious sections of the ruling elite the victory of the *Concertación* is undoubtedly the best outcome.

The inclusion of the Socialist Party in the government is seen as creating more favorable conditions of “governability”—a phrase that is more and more frequently invoked in favor of the so-called left governments that have come to power elsewhere in Latin America. The perception is that for the right—in Chile the political heirs of Pinochet—to carry out the same policies would create greater conditions of political instability.

Bachelet fell 4 percentage points short of winning an absolute majority of the vote during the first round of the elections December 11, while Piñera, candidate of the National Renovation (RN) party, received 25 percent of the ballots cast. In the second round, the right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI) and its candidate Joaquin Lavín backed Piñera, while the Communist Party called for a vote for Bachelet.

The Chilean CP did so on the grounds that Bachelet had responded favorably to a series of questions that the Stalinist party had put to the candidate covering issues related to electoral reform, labor laws, human rights and other issues.

However, *El Siglo*, the CP’s weekly magazine, published a statement that amounted to a shamefaced disclaimer, stressing: “no one imagines that M. Bachelet is going to change the neo-liberal stamp of the *Concertación*. We only hope that she has some gestures of dignity.” The publication added, “We are and will be a force of opposition, whoever heads the government.” In fact—as its endorsement demonstrated—the CP was and remains a necessary political prop for the capitalist state in Chile, even though its base of support has dwindled dramatically.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact