

Chile: Right-wing presidential candidate wins first round

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Last Sunday's presidential election in Chile took place in the context of increasing social polarization, growing unemployment and a continuing legacy of the dictatorship that ruled the country for 17 years.

On Sunday, December 13, Sebastián Piñera won a plurality of the vote for president, 44 percent. Eduardo Frei came in second with 29 percent. Piñera is the candidate of the Chilean Alliance (Alianza por Chile, APC,) a coalition of two right-wing parties: Piñera's own National Renewal (Renovación Nacional, RN) and the Independent Democratic Union (Unión Democrática Independiente, UDI), the political heir of the Pinochet dictatorship.

Eduardo Frei is the candidate of Concertación, the coalition dominated by the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties that has ruled Chile since Pinochet stepped down in 1989. Frei previously held the office of president between 1994 and 2000.

The two front-runners will face off in a second round vote on January 17. Marco Enríquez-Ominami (New Majority Movement, NM) came in third with 20 percent. The balance of the votes, 6 percent, went to Jorge Arrate from the "Together We Can" (Juntos Podemos) coalition, an alliance between the Communist Party (PC) and the Christian Left (IC).

If Piñera prevails in the second round, on January 17, he will be the first candidate of the Chilean right elected since Jorge Alessandri's victory in 1958.

In the legislature there will be a realignment of forces toward the political right. Out of the 120-member lower house of the legislature, the Chamber of Deputies, Concertación will have 53 votes, while the UDI and RN will have 55. The PC, which has announced its support for Frei, and the Greens each won three seats.

The results of Sunday's elections signal the growing instability of the political setup that has existed in Chile since the restoration of civilian rule in 1990. Throughout that period, power has been in the hands of the Concertación alliance between the Socialist Party of President Michelle Bachelet, the Christian Democracy of current candidate Eduardo Frei, the Party for Democracy (PPD), and the Radical Social Democrats (PRSD).

The replacement of the Pinochet regime with the Concertación governments coincided with similar developments across Latin America's Southern Cone. Military dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay gave way to civilian regimes, with the aim of dampening class conflict and promoting economic growth, based on the integration of the region into the global capitalist

economy. For Chile, this depended in large measure on the expansion of trade between Chile and the United States and throwing the country's economy open to foreign capital. Much of this was put in place under President Frei in the 1990s.

Successive Concertación governments, alternating Socialist and Christian Democratic presidents, continued with and deepened the free market liberal economic agenda begun by Pinochet and his team of neo-liberal economists, the so-called "Chicago Boys". As president in the 1990s, Frei implemented the privatization of the Chile's water as well as its ports.

Ruling in an effective alliance with the openly right-wing parties—from which its policies have become increasingly indistinguishable—Concertación served as the caretaker of the structural changes brutally imposed by the Pinochet regime and enshrined in the Constitution of 1980. This charter remains in effect, together with an amnesty for the military-police assassins and torturers of the dictatorship, enacted in 1978.

The current President, Socialist Party leader Michelle Bachelet, assumed office in 2006 and is barred from succeeding herself.

Outside of meager social assistance programs, Concertación governments did little or nothing to counter the widening gap in living standards. Chilean society is increasingly polarized, even by Latin American standards, comparable to the extreme inequality prevalent in Brazil or South Africa.

Following the double shocks of the 2001 recession, followed by the 2008 Wall Street collapse, Chile now confronts double digit rates of unemployment; in Santiago unemployment is now 13 percent, despite recent high copper revenues, which have been increasingly siphoned off to purchase of armaments for the Chilean military.

The social legacy of successive Concertación governments has been the concentration of wealth by a narrow elite, with access to first class housing, schools and medical care, coexisting with increasing joblessness for the broad masses of working people, with deteriorating public hospitals and schools. Symptomatic of the worsening social conditions are Chile's unprecedented levels of drug addiction and crime.

Disillusionment with this legacy has found sharp expression in the growing rate of abstention at the polls. In the December 13 election, fully 47 percent of those eligible to vote failed to cast ballots. Among the young, the alienation from the existing political structures is the most profound. Only 9.2 percent of those

registered to vote are between the ages of 18 and 30. In 1988, this layer accounted for 36 percent of the electorate.

The class character of the current Concertación administration was starkly exposed during the month-long national teachers strike in November. The walkout was over the “historic debt” which stems from the 1981 transfer of public education from the national government to the cities under General Pinochet, when many teachers went unpaid.

Despite dozens of court decisions in favor of the teachers’ demand, the Chilean government has repeatedly refused to recognize the existence of this debt and to negotiate with the striking educators.

The November strike followed a three-week strike in May and June over the same issue.

The teachers’ actions were part of a continuing strike wave that this year has mobilized health workers and other public employees as well as copper miners at private and state-owned corporations.

The winning candidate December 13, Piñera, is one of the wealthiest men in Latin America and a product of one of the country’s most aristocratic families. His father was an ambassador to the United Nations, while his brother, José, was labor and mining minister under the Pinochet dictatorship, responsible for initiating the privatization of the country’s social security system.

Dubbed the “Chilean Berlusconi,” Sebastián Piñera has a personal fortune estimated at US \$3 billion, which he began accumulating under the Pinochet regime, when financial fraud and super-exploitation of the working class yielded heady profits. His wealth includes controlling interests in LAN Chile, the nation’s flagship airline as well as one of the country’s main television networks. He also owns the Colo Colo football team.

His party, RN, is the most direct political representative of the corporate elite that enriched itself through the policies of privatization and free market capitalism introduced under Pinochet and continued under the Concertación administrations.

RN’s coalition partner, UDI, is the political arm of the former Pinochet regime. It includes figures that participated in the dictatorship and that support the extension of drastic laissez faire economic policies associated with the former regime. Supporters of the UDI include the reactionary ultra-Catholic Opus Dei as well as former military officers that were part of the dictatorship.

Piñera, in a post election rally, declared that the Concertación’s “political cycle” is spent and that a new order is required. During the campaign, the candidate had accused the Concertación government of cronyism and has pledged to construct an administration of corporate experts. Alianza’s program includes the subordination of public education and all other social programs to the profit needs of corporate and financial elites. Piñera has already announced plans to reorganize education and to partially privatize the state-owned Codelco Copper Corporation.

The third-place finish of Marco Enríquez-Ominami is symptomatic of the crisis of the Concertación coalition. The 36-year-old candidate is the son of Miguel Enríquez, the leader of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), a Castroite group formed in 1964 and brutally suppressed under Pinochet. He was killed by security forces when his son was still an infant.

Marco Enríquez-Ominami resigned from the Socialist Party after

failing to gain the coalition’s presidential nomination and ran as an independent on a platform combining “social liberalism”—support for the right to abortion and gay marriage—with even more aggressive free market policies, including the call for the privatization of Chile’s state-owned copper company. Tellingly, his main economic adviser announced he was joining the Piñera campaign after the results of the first round.

The election of three Communist Party deputies—it ran four candidates overall—is consistent with the role that Stalinism has played historically, attempting to channel social discontent back into support for the capitalist state. The three deputies were part of a quid pro quo. In return for not opposing the CP candidates, Concertación will receive the support of the CP in the second round and in the legislature.

Hanging over the campaign was the shadow of the Pinochet years in which tens of thousands of Chileans were murdered, disappeared, tortured, imprisoned and exiled. On the eve of last Sunday’s vote, a Santiago judge issued a report indicating that the 1982 death of former President Eduardo Frei, father of the Concertación candidate, was the result of a medical assassination carried out by agents of the Pinochet dictatorship. He was poisoned to death while hospitalized for minor surgery.

Six men have been arrested in the case: three for the killing and three others for carrying out an illegal autopsy in which all of the organs were removed from the ex-president’s body and replaced with gauze in an attempt to cover up the assassination.

Frei, who had been President before the election of Salvador Allende in 1970, had initially supported the Pinochet coup that deposed and assassinated Allende and imposed a fascist-military dictatorship. By 1980, however he had become an opponent—largely because of a decree by Pinochet that dissolved all political parties, including his own.

Judge Alejandro Madrid’s report did nothing to change the results of an election pitting Frei’s son against a candidate surrounded by supporters and former officials of the Pinochet regime. While shocked by the revelations, 20 years after the end of the dictatorship, large sections of Chile’s working population have drawn the conclusion that there is little in terms of concrete policies to distinguish these two camps.



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