

Chilean right returns to power for first time in 20 years

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With the victory Sunday of billionaire businessman Sebastián Piñera in Chile's run-off presidential election, right-wing parties identified with the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet are set to return to power for the first time in 20 years.

Piñera, the candidate of the right-wing Coalition for Change, scored a narrow victory over Eduardo Frei, a former president and candidate of the *Concertación*, a political alliance dominated by the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party, which has elected all four presidents since the transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule at the end of the 1980s.

Piñera won 52 percent of the vote in Sunday's election, compared to 48 percent for Frei, with 222,742 ballots constituting the margin of victory.

The election marks the first time in half a century that the parties of Chile's traditional right—today represented by the National Renovation party and the Independent Democratic Union—have won a popular vote for president.

Both parties were founded by political collaborators of the Pinochet dictatorship, which came to power in the US-backed military coup of September 11, 1973, and was responsible for the execution, disappearance, torture, imprisonment and exile of tens of thousands of Chileans during its 17-year rule.

Piñera's own ties to the Pinochet dictatorship run deep. The brother of the 60-year-old businessman was the minister in the dictator's last government responsible for the privatization of Chile's pension system, while he himself made his fortune under military rule by introducing credit cards in Chile for the first time.

In 1989, Piñera served as campaign manager for

Hernan Buchi, Pinochet's former finance minister, who ran for president in the first election held since the 1973 military coup.

Three of Piñera's top political advisers held posts under the Pinochet regime.

In the years following the dictatorship, Piñera amassed even more wealth, acquiring a 26 percent controlling share in Lan Chile, South America's largest airline. Share prices for Piñera's holding company, Axxion, soared 20 percent in the wake of the election, triggering an automatic halt to trading. The run-up was fueled by speculation over Piñera's pending sale of his assets, particularly in the airline, before taking office in March.

The gain in share prices has already made the nearly \$14 million in personal funds that Piñera spent on the election a profitable investment.

The turnout in the second round was even smaller than in the first, in which Frei trailed Piñera by a wider margin, and a third candidate, Marco Enriquez-Ominami, a former leading contender in the Socialist Party, ran as an independent, winning 20 percent of the ballots cast.

In Sunday's balloting, some 40 percent of the population—including those who cast blank or nullified ballots, those who abstained and a growing portion of the younger population which does not even register—did not vote for either candidate.

Piñera's victory was won with the votes of barely one third of Chileans legally entitled to cast ballots. This has generally been the approximate share of the population that has voted for the right over the past 20 years.

The election does not reflect any popular reappraisal of the Pinochet years – a poll done in December found that 73 percent of Chileans are hostile to the repressive

and reactionary practices and policies of the former dictatorship.

It does, however, signal growing disillusionment among Chilean working people with the policies of the *Concertación* and its allies, which have over the course of 20 years maintained intact the economic structures—as well as much of the reactionary and repressive legal system—imposed under the dictatorship.

The result has been an ever-growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial elite and unprecedented levels of social inequality. Successive waves of privatization have gone hand-in-hand with attacks on previously won social rights to public health, housing, social security and education.

Meanwhile, the so-called “Chilean miracle,” which generated 5 percent growth rates together with extreme social polarization, has ground to a halt under the impact of the world financial crisis. The country has seen negative growth over the last two years and an official unemployment rate that rose by a third over the last year, reaching 10.2 percent last September.

Piñera’s political handlers consciously emulated the Obama campaign in the US, casting the rightist as the candidate of “change,” running on a program of “hope for the future.”

In the course of the campaign, he promised to create 1 million jobs, make a one-time handout of \$80 to all of Chile’s poor and extend unspecified benefits to the country’s middle class. He also vowed to implement a law-and-order crackdown by putting 1,000 more police on the streets.

Chile’s Socialist Party President Michelle Bachelet went beyond extending formal congratulations to Piñera, going to the rightist candidate’s home for breakfast the day after the election and announcing that she would take him along to an upcoming Group of Rio meeting in February.

For his part, Piñera has spoken of forming a government of “national unity” based on “consensus.” Given the right-wing parties’ lack of a majority in the Chilean congress, his government will need support from elements of the *Concertación* parties to enact legislation. It is likely that Piñera will try to incorporate some of their members in his cabinet.

The *Concertación* itself has functioned in consensus with the right over the past two decades. This is in line with a long historical trajectory.

In the 1970s, the earlier incarnation of this popular front formation, the Popular Unity government of Socialist Party President Salvador Allende, politically and literally disarmed the Chilean workers in the run-up to the military coup, which claimed the life of Allende, together with thousands of others.

In 1988-1989, it negotiated a peaceful transition with the Pinochet dictatorship in which it upheld the same ruling class interests defended by the military regime, accepted the 1980 constitution dictated by the generals and agreed to an amnesty for those responsible for horrific crimes against the Chilean people.

While the leaders of the *Concertación* parties are talking in terms of the victory of the Pinochet right at the ballot box being a vindication of Chilean democracy, the reality is that the coming to office of Piñera will signal a further turn to reaction by the state and an intensification of the class struggle in Chile.



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