

The ignominious role of Chile's "left" in Kast's sweeping assault on immigrants

Part 1: The center-left's human rights posturing in the service of anti-immigration

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This is the first of a two-part series.

Since assuming power on March 11, 2026 the government of President José Antonio Kast has launched the most sweeping assault on immigrants in Chile since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990.

Kast, the son of a Nazi German officer who escaped to Chile via the so-called "rat line" after World War II and whose family collaborated in the dictatorship's repression, came to power at the head of a self-declared "government of emergency," promising to rule through presidential decrees.

His "Border Shield Plan," the centerpiece of his immigration agenda, calls for the construction of 5-meter (16.5-foot) high walls, electric fences and 3-meter (9.8-foot) deep trenches along the borders with Peru and Bolivia, combined with an expanded military deployment, surveillance drones, thermal cameras and infrared sensors.

During his election campaign, Kast pledged to close the borders, build detention centers, and apply "tough measures so that they cannot work, so that they no longer receive subsidies, so that they cannot send resources abroad."

Kast's program represents a social counterrevolution targeting first the most vulnerable section of the population—some 337,000 irregular immigrants and refugees who fled the social, political and economic catastrophes afflicting Venezuela, Colombia, Haiti and other parts of Latin America.

Since taking office, Kast has moved rapidly to implement this program. On June 7, during a visit to the Chacalluta border complex in Arica, he signed two bills: a constitutional reform to extend the maximum administrative detention period for immigrants with expulsion orders from 5 days to 60 days, renewable twice up to a total of 180 days, and a bill to criminalize the transport of irregular immigrants within Chilean territory.

The government has also proposed making irregular, or undocumented, entry a criminal offense, reclassifying what is currently an administrative infraction as a crime and has advanced legislation requiring healthcare centers, schools and social security agencies to provide personal data on undocumented immigrants to immigration authorities.

Frank Sauerbaum, the director of the National Migration Service, has declared bluntly: "Immigrants need to know that we will no longer accept them as undocumented. We won't let them work, and social benefits will be restricted."

A bill passed by the Chamber of Deputies in March 2026 and now before the Senate would add a provision allowing "distribution of medical attention and educational system coverage" to be "prioritized in favor of nationals, over foreigners in irregular migratory condition," while requiring a valid Chilean ID card to access state-funded benefits. This

effectively strips undocumented immigrants and their children of access to healthcare, education and housing assistance.

Kast's political outlook is thoroughly fascistic. A vocal admirer of the US-backed Pinochet dictatorship, he has publicly supported Carabineros accused of emblematic human rights violations during the 2019 mass uprising and maintains close ties to the military junta's torturers, including Miguel Krasnoff, who is serving a sentence of 1,047 years for torture, kidnapping and disappearances.

In April 2024, Kast visited El Salvador to meet with fascist President Nayib Bukele and tour the notorious Terrorism Confinement Center, which he has cited as a model for Chile.

He has drawn direct inspiration from Donald Trump. Participating in the Budapest Conservative Political Action Conference in May 2024 alongside kindred spirits from Spain's Vox, Hungary's Orbán and other European far-right parties, he paraphrased Trump's racist rhetoric, claiming that among immigrants were "criminals, hired assassins, members of international gangs, rapists and abusers." His Republican Party, named in homage to Trump, has for seven years been at the forefront of fomenting virulent nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism, whipping up a pogrom-like atmosphere against Haitian, Venezuelan and other economic refugees.

Kast first ran for president as an independent in 2017, building his profile almost exclusively on xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric, and in 2025 he ran on the most right-wing platform of any candidate since the return to civilian rule.

Yet the conditions for Kast's assault were prepared over more than a decade by the entire Chilean political establishment, including, and especially, the so-called "left."

Following the devastating 2010 earthquake, large Haitian diaspora communities formed in Brazil, drawn by construction work for the World Cup and Olympics. When Brazil's economy entered a deep recession and the Obama administration resumed deportations of Haitians in September 2016, followed by Trump's even more aggressive border closures, these populations were forced to redirect. Chile, with its relatively open migration policies at the time, absorbed much of this flow: The Haitian population in Chile surged from 1,649 in 2014 to 73,098 in 2017.

In the 2017 presidential election, in which Kast first emerged as a national figure, the center-left contender, Alejandro Guillier, running as the candidate of the New Majority coalition backed by the Communist Party, sought to compete with Kast. As a senator in 2013, Guillier had declared that "the arrival of immigrants is degrading the quality of life of Antofagasta residents, especially those of low income." In October 2015, he proposed "more expeditious mechanisms for the expulsion of those

convicted by final judicial sentence.” During the 2017 campaign itself, he called for “a more selective migration policy” and stated that “Chile needs to promote a certain type of migration more than another.”

Beatriz Sánchez of the Broad Front, promoted as the progressive candidate in 2017, apparently faced an internal fight after a draft of her platform included the framing of immigration as a national security question. Days after Broad Front’s freedom of action announcement for the second round, she explicitly lent credibility to the center-left declaring: “My vote is against Sebastián Piñera, and for that I’m going to vote for Alejandro Guillier.” The other prominent Broad Front figures who backed Guillier were the ex-student radicals-turned-deputies, Giorgio Jackson and Gabriel Boric.

Scapegoating the most vulnerable

Anti-immigration has never been simply the position of the right; it was used by the entire political caste to scapegoat these vulnerable sections as waves of mass social unrest emerged in the 2010s against of Chile’s free market “miracle” economy, tied almost exclusively to the export of copper, timber and agriculture sector goods. Forty years of privatization, labor repression and constitutional protections for capital had produced staggering levels of inequality and a social tinderbox amid economic stagnation following the 2008 global financial crisis and the end of the resources super-cycle.

President Sebastián Piñera’s original migration bill, Bulletin N° 8970-06, was submitted in 2013 during his first term. It then became the vehicle that, after years of revisions, would eventually become Law 21.325 in 2021. But it was the government of Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018), a leading member of the Chilean Socialist Party, that gave the anti-immigrant agenda its “human rights” gloss. In August 2017, Bachelet signed and sent to Congress her own migration reform proposal, which she presented as a rights-centered modernization.

The bill’s first article was drafted in rights-affirming terms, recognizing “freedom of movement and the right to migrate.” Yet the substance was punitive: The bill created a National Foreigners Registry to be run by the Interior Sub-secretariat, established a catalogue of entry-denial grounds, created an administrative sanctioning procedure as one of its four core pillars and placed a Migration Policy Committee under the chairmanship of the Interior Minister, an explicitly security-focused framework.

While Bachelet’s bill did not pass before her term ended, its spirit, the combination of rights rhetoric with a control-and-expulsion architecture, was absorbed by Piñera’s bill 21.325, made into law in 2021.

Law 21.325 coincided with an even larger exodus—that of Venezuelans fleeing the catastrophic conditions produced by US and European imperialist sanctions. Beginning in 2015, the Obama administration imposed crippling economic sanctions on Venezuela that were ratcheted up by the Trump and Biden administrations. These measures, combined with the collapse of oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic, plunged the mass of the Venezuelan population into dire hardship.

More than 7 million people fled, with some 532,700 arriving in Chile. Law 21.325 made it virtually impossible for undocumented immigrants already on the move to regularize their status once inside the country. The law established that visa and residence applications must generally be made from outside Chilean territory, with no broad “change of category” from irregular entrant to resident permit-holder once inside the country.

For Venezuelans who had already left their country months or years earlier and were transiting through Colombia, Peru or Ecuador, the requirement to apply at a Chilean consulate in Caracas assumed a starting point that no longer existed. Consular operations in Venezuela were

severely degraded amid the broader diplomatic and institutional collapse.

For Haitians, similar requirements to apply at a single consulate in Port-au-Prince ran into Haiti’s own institutional breakdown. The result, as migration researchers and organizations have documented, was that large numbers of Haitians and Venezuelans were pushed into prolonged irregular status, not because they avoided legal channels but because the legal channels assumed conditions that did not match reality. This was structural criminalization, embedded in a law that the Bachelet and Piñera governments alike had presented as a modernization.

A filthy role in this entire process was played by the corporate media. The predominantly rightist media monopolies saturated the airwaves with nightmarish scenarios of cities besieged by crime and a country facing an extreme security crisis. Interviewed state authorities would explicitly associate this supposed crisis with immigration, vilifying immigrants as the source of drug trafficking, organized crime and delinquency.

The fever pitch is captured by these two examples: Raúl Arancibia, former regional prosecutor of Tarapacá, claimed that when Tren de Aragua arrived in late 2021, “even Chilean criminals who weren’t used to exercising that kind of violence had to adapt”; Ignacio Castillo, the National Prosecutor’s organized crime director, told the *Financial Times* that such groups “have fundamentally changed the nature of crime in Chile.”

The claims that such crimes were new to Chile are a brazen falsification of history. The Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), which Kast openly admires, carried out systematic, state-organized mass murder, forced disappearances and torture. The Caravan of Death executed at least 93 prisoners without trial in 1973. Villa Grimaldi functioned as a clandestine extermination center where most detainees were killed after extensive torture. Operation Colombo fabricated evidence to conceal the disappearance of murdered leftists. Operation Condor coordinated cross-border assassination of political opponents across the Southern Cone. To date, nearly 500 military personnel and dictatorship collaborators have been prosecuted, and roughly 1,250 people remain officially disappeared.

Manuel Contreras, the notorious secret police chief, implicated Pinochet personally in drug trafficking as a financing and intelligence mechanism. Pinochet’s own family was separately convicted in connection with the Riggs Bank case for hidden offshore accounts to the tune of tens of millions stolen from the public purse. The junta’s involvement in arms trafficking included Carlos Cardoen’s arms manufacturing and export network which sold cluster bombs to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

Of course, the most documented crime is Chile’s “stolen children” in which between 8,000 and 20,000 babies (there is no official record) were taken from poor or single mothers who were told their infants had died at birth. With the complicity of clinics, judges and other state functionaries, the dictatorship sold these babies to US and European adoption agencies.

Whatever the scale of Tren de Aragua’s trafficking operations and crimes, they pale in comparison to the crimes of the dictatorship that Kast and his allies seek to rehabilitate.

The neo-liberal Center for Public Studies survey released in June 2026 reveals the success of this media-political campaign in shaping public consciousness: 55 percent of Chileans now support banning immigration entirely (a 13-point increase from October 2023); 67 percent believe immigrants “raise crime rates”; and 60 percent believe the government spends “too much money helping immigrants.”

Yet the actual data tells a different story. Chile’s homicide rate was 5.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2025, one of the lowest in Latin America. Of nearly 17 million National Health Fund beneficiaries, the irregular foreign population represents just 1.8 percent. Of 24.5 million medical consultations recorded in 2024, only 1.6 percent corresponded to irregular immigrants.

The perception of an immigrant-driven crime wave and a fiscal crisis caused by immigrant service use is a political fabrication, cultivated by

the media monopolies and the entire political establishment to divert working class anger away from the real source of social misery, capitalism and its state, and toward the most vulnerable section of the working class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, this campaign was deliberately aimed at cultivating xenophobic demands to expel immigrants and for an iron fist against crime.

To be continued



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