

Chile: Election day in Santiago

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Sunday, December 15, Santiago de Chile, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The sun is at its zenith, the sky looks clear and temporarily free from the halo of pollution that clings every day to the slopes of the Andes which overlook the city. The heat of the southern summer is already here, stifling. Opposite the town hall, in the borough of the La Florida neighbourhood (in the south of the capital) there is a supermarket (which belongs to the multinational Wal-Mart), a big Christmas market and the Bellavista La Florida College. As in the first round of the presidential election on November 17, this municipal establishment has been transformed into a polling station. Passers-by glance at the soldiers stationed outside the entrance. More rarely, some of them go in.

After an often long working week [\[1\]](#), couples laden with plastic bags take the time to breathe a little, less than ten days before the start of the festive season. People constantly come and go between stands selling trinkets from China and those offering local crafts or coloured garlands. To the dismay of some, the Americo Vespucio Mall, just on the other side of the immense Avenue Vicuña Mackenna, remains closed: on this election day, the authorities have decided to close the temples of consumption. No matter: at the same time, close to the city centre, the Meiggs neighbourhood is submerged by a human tide of thousands of people who have come to enjoy the shops. Business is good and there are more customers than ever: "Here, we buy, we do not vote," says a poster on the wall of a shop.

Already in the morning, the site of the conservative newspaper *El Mercurio* indicated the very low turnout. Once his "civic duty done," the outgoing president Sebastián Piñera - a wealthy businessman who in 2010 pulled off a win for the Right for the first time since the end of the dictatorship in 1989, solemnly declared: "Every Chilean who does not want to go and vote demonstrates a lack of affection for his country." To no avail.

This is the sixth presidential election since the beginning of the democratic transition, but the first one to take place on the basis of voluntary voting (with automatic registration on the electoral rolls). Until then, as in many Latin American countries, registered voters were obliged to vote or risk having to pay a fine. Under these conditions, many Chileans, often among young people and the working class, did not register to vote: if you're not on the list, they can't prosecute you.

The municipal elections in 2012 had already taken place according to the new rules. Abstention reached 60 per cent, putting politicians in a cold sweat. In the first round of the presidential election, and despite the presence of nine candidates, less than half of the 13.5 million voters (out of a population of over 17 million) went to vote. At the end of the election day, the result was no surprise: Evelyn Matthei, the candidate of the Right, got 37.8 per cent of the vote, so the Socialist candidate, Michelle Bachelet, with over 62.2 per cent, will be the next president. But the victory of someone who was president between 2005 and 2010 was obtained with 255,000 fewer votes than in

her first term. Only 41 per cent of voters turned out to vote: this is the lowest figure since the democratic transition. To this must be added the denial of the right to vote to more than 850,000 Chileans living abroad (a legacy of the military regime).

For Laurence Golborne, a former minister and a leading figure of the Right, "it is a matter of concern that only 25 per cent of Chileans elected the new president." The director of the Electoral Service, Patricio Santa María, emphasized on the contrary that the high level of abstention does not in the least detract from the legitimacy of the result. Backed by the chorus of a myriad of members of parliament, the Christian Democrat Senator Ximena Rincón reminded us that "President Obama was elected with only 40 per cent of the vote and no one doubts his leadership." Obama coming to the rescue of Chilean democracy? Beyond the numbers game, all the political leaders know that there has been a profound crisis of representativeness in the Chilean political system for many years. A system based on the Constitution inherited from the dictatorship (1973-1989) and consolidated during the governments of the Concertación, a coalition of Socialists, Social Liberals and Christian Democrats (1990-2010). At the entrance to the Christmas market in La Florida, an old man with weather-beaten features remarks with an ironic smile: "It's better to take advantage of this beautiful Sunday to do our Christmas shopping rather than go and vote! Anyway, what use is politics to us? Tomorrow we will still have to get up early for work."

Concertación 2.0

Bachelet's victory was not much of a surprise. At the end of her first term, polls credited her with a level of popularity of more than 80 per cent. After a spell in New York at the head of an agency of the United Nations specializing in the defence of women (UN-Women), she returned to Chile after an impeccable campaign of communication. Her success (74.92 per cent) in the primary on June 30 even had her hoping for a first-round victory. All the more so since, faced with critics reminding her that the Concertación had deepened and worn out the neoliberal model when it was in government from 1990 to 2010, Bachelet showed herself capable of forging a new narrative aimed at re-enchanting a section of the electorate.

First of all, the coalition managed to bring in the Communist Party (PC) and small social democratic organizations [2], thus creating the "New Majority". In exchange for several constituencies and arguing that it was now a case of creating a vast electoral majority around a project of reforms, the PC - the main party to the left of the Concertación - thus became an important ally when the time came to defend the progressive image of the former president. The party, created a hundred years ago by Luis Emilio Recabarren, thus doubled its parliamentary representation. Among the six Communist MPs, there are two young women: the former leader of the Communist Youth, Karol Cariola, and one of the leading figures of the student movement of 2011, Camila Vallejo (elected with 40 per cent of the vote). And despite making the Christian Democrats (DC, centre-right) gnash their teeth, the PC offers the future government (limited) support among the social movements, in particular in the leadership of the Unitary Confederation of Workers (CUT), led by the Communist Francisca Figueroa, who openly called for a vote for Bachelet. The day after the election, the president of the PC, Guillermo Teillier, could not yet confirm whether the party would be taking part in the government, but he reaffirmed "its loyalty" to the programme defended by the president, recalling the historic significance of this victory at the polls: "The Communist Party has not won a presidential election since the time of Salvador Allende" in 1970.

Besides the PC, all the parties of the New Majority got very good results in the parliamentary elections - held at the same time as the first round of the presidential election - winning a fairly comfortable majority in the Congress, with 21 senators out of 38 and 68 MPs out of 120. This position of strength will give the executive some qualified majorities to start modifying "organic

laws” and begin the promised reforms, despite the multiple legislative “locks” that were inserted in the “Pinochet Constitution.”

A government of reforms?

Bachelet, with the benefit of an enormous 500-strong team of experts, organized her campaign around three main axes, with a great deal of political marketing.

Firstly, the promise of a “participatory, democratic and institutional” constitutional reform, which will require an agreement in Parliament with the Right (in order to obtain the necessary two-thirds quorum). The discussion could be preceded by consultations within “civil society” and approved by referendum: a queen of ambiguity, playing on the internal tensions within her coalition, the candidate refused to come out either for or against a genuine Constituent and popular Assembly (CA), to the chagrin of the collectives who conducted the campaign “Mark CA on your ballot paper” [3]. The second axis was a fiscal reform equivalent to 3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) aimed at increasing (moderately) the enormous profits of the major companies in the country [4]. And finally, a reform of education that is partly in response to the big youth mobilizations of 2011- 2012.

On the evening of the victory, from the luxurious Plaza San Francisco Hotel, Bachelet also made a point of thanking “the street”, especially young people, and reiterated her promise to establish a “public education system, free and of quality”. “Today” she said, “no one doubts that profit cannot be the driving force of education.” In a country where the education market is gigantic and where many leading figures of the Concertación are central players in this lucrative business, some people have doubts [5]. All the more so in that the reform, envisaged as being “gradual” and intended to be completed in six years (which means after the end of the president’s term of office) aims at making it possible for students to have free access to universities through public subsidies... without however putting an end to the hegemony of the private universities and the system of subsidized private colleges (a system instituted in the last days of the dictatorship).

Emergence of social movements and neoliberal fragmentation

As the noted historian Mario Garcés points out, Chile today is characterized by the “awakening of society” and the emergence of social movements. The powerful student struggles for education were preceded by mass mobilizations in different regions, by extremely important environmental struggles, but also by the renewal of strikes over wages and different trade-union struggles. In this context, some people see the election of Michelle Bachelet as a defensive manoeuvre, capable of stabilizing the export-centred neoliberal model in a context of a powerful rise of social conflicts. Among them are the sociologists Felipe Portales and Alberto Mayol. The latter analyzes the incombustible figure of Bachelet as a “Christological” phenomenon, embodying in the collective imagination the pain of the dictatorship (she was a victim of torture and her father, a loyalist general, was murdered), while at the same time stressing that this candidature is enabling a Concertación that was running out of steam to improve its image, without jeopardizing macroeconomic stability and the interests of the multinationals. In this regard, the candidate and her team have reiterated – without it being a question of an “exclusive ideological agreement” – that it will be essential to “maintain an active relationship of economic coordination with the Pacific Alliance,” a geostrategic axis supported by the United States along with Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Peru (all of which have right-wing governments). The election was hardly over when Bolivian President Evo Morales did not hesitate to challenge the new president, emphasizing the “pro-

imperialist and pro-capitalist” nature of the Alliance: “I doubt that [Michelle Bachelet] is a socialist. I’ll tell you frankly, openly: if Bachelet remains in the Alliance for the Pacific it will be definitively confirmed who she defends, where she comes from and what she wants.”

In the first round, on November 17, some prominent members of the business elite did not hesitate to lend their support to the former president. Starting with a heavyweight of local capitalism: Jorge Awad, president of the Association of Chilean Banks, who stressed to what extent the tax reform proposed by the candidate would be painless and that she had already demonstrated that she would be effective in guaranteeing foreign investment (especially in the mining sector). Mr. Awad is not an exception: the contribution of the country’s big companies to the socialist presidential campaign represented three times the sums allocated to the candidate supported by the outgoing president...

Matteï was only a candidate by default, following a string of defections. She was also the daughter of a general, but one of those who supported the dictatorship; she represented the most reactionary sectors of the right-wing coalition, the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), promising to govern with “the Bible in her hands.” In comparison, the outgoing president and some members of National Renewal, the other party in the coalition, still nurture the strategy of a liberal renewal of the Right, so as to regain power in 2017. But the ghost of Pinochet and of the massive violations of human rights still sticks to the soles of the coalition and the UDI is far from being liquidated: it is still the strongest force in Parliament, thanks to well-established clientelist practices in some of the poorest neighborhoods.

And now...

Madam Vasquez is a street vendor who sells clothes. Living on a modest income and at the head of a large family, she “does not feel represented by either Matteï or Bachelet.” According to her, the victory of Bachelet is a signal for “new strikes and demonstrations all over the place. We will surely go back to the time of Popular Unity and there will be destruction, violence. And who pays in situations like that? Well, it’s us, the common people.” A certain number of unions and militant collectives are in fact on a war footing, but rather to try and rebuild the social fabric and with the perspective of demanding more from the government. In a society that remains one of the most unequal in Latin America and in which job insecurity prevails in the working class, this is not an easy task [6].

Several subterranean signs confirm, however, that 2014 could be “hot”. Recently, the presidency of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) was won by the libertarian “Struggle” list “. Its leader, Melissa Sepulveda, refused to vote in the second round of the presidential election and spoke against the “parliamentarization of struggles,” a dig at Vallejo and Cariola, as well as at two other newly elected MPs who come from the student movement: Gabriel Boric (Autonomous Left) who succeeded in entering Parliament without the support of the Concertación, and Giorgio Jackson (Democratic Revolution), an ally of the New Majority who was elected as an MP for Santiago at the age of 25.

For its part, after campaigning for Matteï, the newspaper *El Mercurio* now emphasizes that one of the objectives of the new government will be “to restrain the enormous expectations that have been awakened, so as to channel them.”

Franck Gaudichaud

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Many workers work 45 hours a week, six days a week, as is permitted by the Labour Code inherited from the dictatorship.

[2] These are the Citizens' Left (IC), which comes from the Christian Left, and the Broad Social Movement (MAS) of the former Socialist Senator Alejandro Navarro .

[3] Just over 10 per cent of voters in the second round marked their ballot "AC" to emphasize their commitment to the perspective of a Constituent Assembly.

[4] As pointed out by the former Minister of Cooperation and IMF official Nicolás Eyzaguirre in order to reassure "the markets".

[5] The relationship between the Concertación and the education market is confirmed by the latest investigation of the journalist María Olivia Mönckeberg.

[6] Despite an annual rate of growth of more than 5 per cent of GDP, the richest 5 per cent of the population has 257 times the income of the poorest 5 per cent.