

In Chile, the traditional parties collapse

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Since Sunday night, the Chilean press is piling on the superlatives in its attempt to describe the political earthquake that has shaken the country from the Andes to the Atacama desert to the cold Magallanes region: an electoral shock, the collapse of the traditional parties, a 'night of the long knives' for the right, the beginning of the end for Pinochet's legacy, an enormous defeat for president Sebastián Piñera, a victory for social movements... Chileans voted on Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 May in four simultaneous elections: mayoral elections, local council elections, gubernatorial elections, and a vote to select a body that will write the country's new constitution.

No one, least of all the pollsters, had anticipated such upheaval, even though the executive was looking increasingly isolated and the people's rejection of the political class has been obvious for years. Despite the power of the October 2019 protests and their impact on the political landscape, everyone was cautious in believing that a transformation that be produced within this electoral cycle.

Attention has focussed, in particular, on the hard-won elections for the Constitutional Convention, which will replace the neoliberal constitution instituted during the Pinochet dictatorship. The obstacles to transformation were many, including the right and far right's decision to stand as a single party (under the banner of 'Chile Vamos'); a pact signed within parliament requiring that the constitution be validated by a two-thirds majority; the financial and media power of the main parties that have governed the country for the last 30 years; the difficulties faced by representatives from the social movements in having their candidacy recognised in law; the fragmentation of the independent camp and procrastination of the left; the scale of the pandemic and the economic crisis.

Nevertheless Sunday's election results are game-changing. First, as far as the constituent assembly is concerned, the right-wing coalition has had to swallow its pride. Its leaders were sure of winning at least one third of the seats (52 out of 155), ensuring it a right of veto over all articles in the future constitution: in this, it failed. Chile Vamos will have to settle for 37 seats, just over 23% of the vote. This is a punishment and a humiliation for the incumbent President Piñera, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility for the crisis his country is experiencing.

Another surprise is that the balance of power in the left-wing opposition has been largely reversed. The list, which brought together the Communist Party and the Large Front (Frente amplio, the new left that formed out of the 2010 social movements), won 28 elected constituents (and 18% of the votes cast). Conversely, the social-liberal parties of the former Concertación, which governed from 1990-2010 without questioning the economic legacy of the dictatorship, won just 25 seats (including 15 for the Socialist party and only two for the Christian Democratic Party).

But the left and centre-left will only represent a third of the assembly. The real surprise is the proportion of votes that went to independent candidates, who have taken 48 seats, marking a rejection of mainstream political parties. This is a very diverse set of candidates, including some notorious conspiracy theorists and conservatives. A majority criticise the authoritarian, and even clearly anti-neoliberal, heritage of past decades.

This is particularly true of the candidates on the 'people's list', which groups together

representatives of social movements and organised civil society, and which brings into the constituent assembly figures from the October revolt, for example 'Aunt Pikachu', and several leaders of the feminist movement including Alondra Carillo. In fact, in this election it seems women had far better results than men, with some of them even having to give up their seats in order to maintain parity in the Constitutional Convention.

So, as the right loses its veto, alliances between representatives of the social and political left could win two-thirds of the assembly and finally start to deconstruct Chilean neoliberalism.

Anger was also expressed in the municipal elections and the vote for regional governors, the results of which have yet to be deciphered in more detail. Jorge Sharp (of the anti-neoliberal left) has been comfortably re-elected in Valparaíso, as well as Daniel Jadue, the communist mayor of the municipality of Recoleta in the metropolitan region (with over 64% votes cast), and a very popular candidate for the presidential election in six months time. All this is enough to make the right and social liberals quake. In Santiago, Irací Hassler, a feminist activist and communist, has won against Felipe Alessandri, who was called out for his misogynist and anti-communist statements during the campaign. As for governors, the victory in Valparaíso of Rodrigo Mundaca, an environmental campaigner, defender of water as a public good and winner of the 2019 Danièle Mitterand prize, was euphorically celebrated by many social and environmental activists.

The crisis of representation within the parties and the system has not only translated into votes. This weekend's abstention rates were also historic, at 61.4%. The number is even higher in working class municipalities, where it exceeds 65%, even 70%.

Thus, a majority of citizens did not feel implicated by this political moment (a section of those who mobilised in October 2019 called for a boycott of the 'electoral circus' in favour of continuing the struggle in the streets). A majority of Chileans continue to show their indifference or their defiance to those on top, whether these be of the right or the left, in a party or independent.

The constitutional convention must sit for 9-12 months. In the meantime, November's presidential elections will again ask the question: what kind of Chile needs to be built in order to move on from Pinochet's dictatorship?

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