

The new Bachelet government in Chile, neoliberalism and struggle

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This article is the introduction to a series of articles covering different aspects of the situation in Chile today. The other articles and interviews will be published as they become available.

International Viewpoint

For months, the business seemed settled : Michèle Bachelet would be the next president of the Republic, initiating thus a second term after four years of the government of millionaire entrepreneur Sebastián Piñera, representing the neoliberal right and former supporters of the Pinochet dictatorship. Facing Evelyn Matthei (the right wing candidate, who won 37.8 % of the votes), Michelle Bachelet will be then the next president with more than 62.2% of the vote. This clear electoral victory validates the results of the primary elections and the first round, while the parliamentary elections gave her a majority in both chambers of the congress.

Although the right has been in power since 2010, Matthei's campaign was a fiasco. After several "casting" errors in the selection of candidates, the final choice was a government minister and the daughter of a general from the dictatorship era, deploying an ultra-conservative Catholic discourse. Facing her was Bachelet, equipped with a huge campaign budget and the broad support of the dominant classes, returning from the USA (where she headed "UNO Women"), with an undoubted popularity. Obscuring the fact that she is the purest product of the Concertation, the coalition of social liberals and Christian democrats which dominated political life for 20 years (1990-2010) and deepened the neoliberal model forged under the dictatorship (1973-1989).

The Communists nonetheless chose to join the coalition, now called the "new majority" and called for a first round vote for Bachelet. That allowed them to double their number of deputies (with 6 seats). Among them the former Communist youth leader Karol Cariola and the student leader Camila Vallejo. But at a high price: despite the discontent of many activists, the party gives credibility to the Concertation, previously denounced as an instrument of capitalism and the class coalition. The CP thus becomes a kind of "progressive" booster of the future government in the unions (including the CUT, led by a Communist) and a part of the student movement.

However the majority of the popular classes do not feel themselves represented by Bachelet and an institutional system fashioned by the dictatorship. Of around 13 million voters less than 50 % voted, a record low. If some activist sectors and intellectuals (like the historian Sergio Grez) consciously called for an "electoral strike" it was above all apathy and disenchantment which dominated in a society marked by neoliberal atomisation.

This is confirmed by the marginal result of the left candidacies. Out of the nine candidates, two tried to stress an anti-neoliberal discourse, demanding a programme of a break with the established consensus. Marcel Claude, an economist close to the Humanist Party and the student movement and supported by a broad movement (called “Todos a la Moneda”) regrouped several small collectives of far left origin. He finally won only 180,000 votes (2.8 %), despite an initially successful media breakthrough [1]. Roxana Miranda of the Equality Party was a combative female candidate originating from the poor neighbourhoods, but her discourse of rage and dignity, anchored in the movement of the “pobladores” (the urban poor), did not achieve a break through (1.2 %). Neither of these movements identified openly with socialism but they raised transitional demands whose application would have meant a break with neoliberalism and social mobilization of great scope.

For a number of collectives and activists of radical left origin, the only issue was the electoral boycott and the call for mobilisation, since the conjuncture did not allow a mass anti-capitalist electoral participation. In this perspective, the “reorganisation of a revolutionary bloc” could not in the short term pass by an “electoral ritual” still inserted in the institutional mould bequeathed by the dictatorship : the priority remains re-organisation of the popular classes and their politicization [2].

However the conjuncture could be disturbed in the coming months. Recent years have seen big mobilisations: massive student movements, strikes in several sectors, ecological and regional struggles. The dictatorship’s heritage is in the line of fire with the recent strikes of port workers being a clear example of this (particularly in the north of the country), despite a trade union movement which is still very weak and often highly bureaucratised.

Bachelet has moreover had to take account in part of the eruption of themes imposed by the social movement over the last two years. Thus her programme advocates the “gradual” return to free education in state subsidised universities, tax reform, reform of the employment code and the Constitution (but without any commitment to a Constituent Assembly), the creation of a state pension fund and equal marriage. A way also of anticipating and channelling future mobilisations.

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Footnotes

[1] “Todos a la Moneda” includes activist collectives originating from the “red and black” tradition of the former MIR, Trotskyism, a libertarian network (“Red libertarian”), the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front, and CP dissidents.

[2] See for example the text of José Antonio Gutiérrez D. and Rafael Agacino: “Los libertarios en Chile y la participación electoral”, criticizing the candidacy of Marcel Claude (<http://rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=...>) or the analyses of the PTR (Partido de los trabajadores revolucionarios, affiliated to the FT-CI “Trotskyist faction”) : <http://www.ptr.cl/>