

Chile: “The working classes have dropped out”

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As head of state since March 2022, elected with the hope of reorienting his country on the path of progressivism, Chile’s young president Gabriel Boric (38) seems rather to have refocused his politics, unable to compete with the conservative bloc or to unite the left around his government. At mid-term, Boric has not yet been able to carry out the expected far-reaching reforms. Luis Reygada interviewed Franck Gaudichaud, a specialist in Latin America, for the French newspaper L’Humanité.

Luis Reygada - At mid-term, what is the balance sheet of the man who promised to “reopen the main avenues” of socialist President Salvador Allende?

Franck Gaudichaud - Gabriel Boric came to power embodying the hope of a post-neoliberal turn, in a very particular context since it followed the social explosion of 2019. He was driven by very strong demands, particularly social ones, and was at the head of a coalition including parties much further to the left than he was (such as the Chilean Communist Party) and fundamentally critical of the twenty years of government in the post-dictatorship period, the Concertation (between 1990 and 2010), marked by compromises, even neoliberal management of power by left-wing governments during this period.

Boric thus arrived with promises of profound reforms in a country where the private sector represented the structuring base of society, with a stranglehold on broad and largely deregulated sectors (education, health, pensions and so on). In general, then, there was the hope of a “new Chile” in which the public would succeed in regaining the upper hand over market forces that Boric had hinted at. On all these aspects, the results are extremely disappointing.

Due to the lack of a majority in Congress?

Yes, but that’s not all. The government is not in a position of strength within the institutions, so it has to negotiate constantly and has ended up governing from the “extreme centre,” including the reintegration of central figures of the Socialist Party into power. The president was not able to take advantage of the honeymoon of the first six months of his term: he staked everything on the approval of the first draft of the constitution to consolidate a political dynamic with a progressive orientation. Its rejection (by 62%, in September 2022 - editor’s note) was a cold shower. This defeat hurt the left as a whole and the social movements, which are now struggling after a long and rather chaotic electoral cycle that led to a second constituent process, dominated by the far right. In the end, this second draft of the constitution was also rejected - by more than 55% of the voters. The government appeared to be neutralized, unable to regain the political initiative.

In addition, the lack of capacity to mobilize social bases and social movements means that the government does not count on a broad and structured support that will allow it to compete with opposition forces. Even less to challenge the Chilean oligarchy, which can count on the most

conservative and traditional parties to represent its interests.

Still, progress has been made, and polls give the president an approval rating of between 26 and 30 percent?

Absolutely, which is more than its predecessors. After two years, he can still count on a base, and it is undeniable that he has a certain foothold among the progressive middle classes with university degrees. But the working classes have dropped out.

There has been progress in the social field (reduction of the working week to forty hours, but with new flexibilizations of work, increase in minimum wages, easier access to free primary healthcare and so on) but the major structural reforms (especially fiscal reforms) have not been able to see the light of day, and the dominant framework remains totally capitalist and dominated by the same oligarchy. The disappointment is very great and strengthens the far right.

A rise also favoured by an unfavourable security context, with an increase in crime?

It is true that, in about six years, Chile has seen a doubling of its rate of the most violent crimes, with a clear increase in the activity of groups linked to drug cartels (such as the Venezuelan cartel called "El tren de Aragua"). This violence, sometimes sadly spectacular, has a great impact on the working and middle classes. However, the figures show a slight improvement in recent months, and we are faced with another problem that is difficult to overcome, sharpened by the ability of the mainstream media to impose security issues in the public debate, from an angle unfavourable to the left.

However, Boric's response to the problem of cartel violence has also disappointed many of his own people. The reform of the Carabinieri Corps, which has been responsible for serious human rights violations, particularly in 2019, has never taken place. Boric had always refused to militarize the issue of law and order, but this has now been done, in the context of the fight against crime, but also in the conflict with the Mapuche people in the south of the country. There is a real public policy problem here regarding an issue that is much easier to manage for the far right, which obviously advocates a militarization at all costs, supported by a xenophobic and racist discourse.

Are we a long way from the "radical left" president that the right likes to portray?

President Boric has always shown himself to be willing to engage in dialogue, even to seek to create a certain national unity, as was seen during the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1973 coup d'état. This strategy does not pay off when we are dealing with a right that does not want it, that continues to claim - at least in part - the legacy of the dictatorship, that systematically opposes any compromise and seeks, on the contrary, to permanently "hysterise" any political debate, for example by pointing the finger at the left wing of the government in a country where virulent anti-communism remains present. The recent accidental death of ex-president Sebastian Piñera, one of those responsible for the repression of the 2019 revolt, and the way in which Boric has nevertheless put forward his "republican" profile, has also surprised or even shocked part of his activist base.

In fact, Boric has made many symbolic gestures that have shown an evolution of his ideological positioning, to the point of recently claiming the legacy of the Christian Democrat President Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), a major figure of the transition era in the 1990s.

Boric had, however, constructed himself politically in opposition to this historical period. To date, we can say that his mandate is more in line with what the transition period and its "consensus"

represented. Fifty years after the coup, if we have to make a comparison, it is with Michelle Bachelet and her administration rather than that of the Popular Unity government of the 1970s.

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