

# Disenchantment dominates Chilean election campaign

By Mauricio Saavedra  
8 December 1999

The campaign for the December 12 presidential elections in Chile has revealed deepening disenchantment among broad masses of people with the parliamentary framework erected a decade ago when General Augusto Pinochet relinquished office.

Following the national referendum in 1989 that opened the door to civilian rule, a coalition of formerly outlawed parties, including the Socialist Party-Party for Democracy (PS-PPD) and the Christian Democrats won the first presidential elections in 17 years. The coalition, known as the Concertacion has led two administrations.

During the 1993 presidential elections, the Concertacion's Eduardo Frei achieved a 58 percent majority—the highest vote won by a presidential candidate since 1931. Approval ratings for his administration have since plummeted. A report conducted in September by the Centre for Public Studies (CEP) showed only 28 percent support for the government's overall performance.

A six-year limit on presidential terms means that Frei will have to leave his post after the elections. The Concertacion coalition held primaries earlier this year and in May elected Ricardo Lagos, a PS-PPD leader, as its presidential candidate.

According to the CEP study, only 37 percent of the electorate supports Lagos. His main opponent, Joaquin Lavin from the rightwing Alliance for Chile, has 20 percent support while the Stalinist Communist Party's candidate has 3 percent.

The rest of the respondents in the poll, representing over one-third of voters, did not support any political parties or candidates running in the elections.

Another report, released by the Chilean Electoral Service showed that of 1.4 million eligible first-time voters aged between 18 and 24, only 85,000 had registered before the August deadline.

The youth vote has been on a steady decline. In 1988, when a referendum sealed Pinochet's departure as President, over 21 percent of the electorate were aged between 18 and 24. This figure fell to 18.2 percent in the 1989 presidential elections, 9.1 percent in the 1996 municipal elections and 5.3 percent this year.

"It can't be that the average age of the electorate is 31," Congressman Roberto Leon said, perplexed by the lack of youth participation. Millions are spent each election year to convince young people to register.

Voting is compulsory for those registered. Yet the number of voters who either cast an invalid ballot or just stayed home increased from 400,000 during the 1993 presidential and congressional elections to 2.4 million in the 1997 congressional

elections. Despite penalties of up to US\$250 for not voting, analysts predict that many voters will react no differently this year.

These indices illustrate that many people are increasingly hostile to a political system and political parties with which they have nothing in common.

Lagos, the Concertacion candidate, is the first Socialist Party candidate to run since 1973, when Pinochet and the military overthrew the administration of Salvador Allende.

Lagos' "Renovated" faction, which presently controls the PS, was the first to abandon the reformist and state interventionist outlook that dominated the party in the 1970s. Allende, who governed in a pact with the Communist Party, introduced a series of limited welfare policies and nationalisations.

Lagos founded the PPD as an offshoot of the PS in 1989. According to one of its leaders, Senator Sergio Bitar, the PPD "is the only party to come into existence after the dictatorship, after the Berlin Wall. Ours is a party with less ideology, more pragmatic... Our strategy is to place ourselves in the centre of the Concertacion, to avoid polarisation. We don't want to return to the old politics that divided Chile."

Yet with this claim the PS-PPD is playing essentially the same role as Allende in the 1970s. In the name of "national unity" and claiming to represent all classes, Allende's coalition suppressed the independent interests of the working class, and sought to appease the right-wing groups and the military generals, even as they prepared the bloody coup of 1973.

Lagos' main opponent, Joaquin Lavin, is a member of the Democratic Independent Union (UDI). The UDI is an ultra-nationalist group, whose members and supporters include former junta officers, secret police agents and admirers of the Spanish fascist leader Franco, as well as fascistic groups such as Fatherland and Liberty.

Lavin's history goes back to the 1980s when he worked as an editor of *El Mercurio*, one of the few newspapers circulating under Pinochet. In 1992, he became the governor of Las Condes, a plush suburb in Santiago.

For electoral purposes Lavin has distanced himself from his own party, with a populist campaign targetted on impoverished regions, promising a million jobs, the abolition of extreme poverty and the provision of "dignified housing". He also claims to support constitutional changes and controls on the military, which still plays a central political role.

Lagos has made almost identical promises, pledging to create

300,000 new jobs and provide "economic growth with more and better jobs," education and health reform, the eradication of extreme poverty and more housing. He has also promised constitutional reforms.

Few people believe that either of the two candidates will or can deliver their promises. As part of the Concertacion government, the PS has issued similar claims each election time. In office they have maintained the levels of poverty existing under the Pinochet regime, kept his free market program intact and systematically defended the military.

In these elections by mutual agreement, neither candidate will make any reference to the past. "There is a tacit pact between the two not to touch each other's past" a political analyst said on the day of the televised presidential debate. A discussion would not only highlight Lavin's sordid past but also expose the PS as the lynchpin of the current political setup.

Pinochet's 1980 constitution prescribed a return to a "protected democracy" by the end of the 1980s. With the prospect of entering government—in a coalition with the Christian Democrats and other parties—Lagos, Ricardo Nunez, Carlos Ominami and other PS leaders entered into discussions with the military government.

A fundamental precondition accepted by the PS leaders was that they could not change the economic and political framework erected by the dictatorship. This included lifetime Senate positions for the Pinochet junta. Five Senate seats were reserved for retired military officers, who have helped maintain an amnesty to protect the military from prosecution for crimes committed during the first five years of the dictatorship.

At the same time, the PS promoted illusions that it would reverse the social conditions created by the military junta and guarantee social equality. It claimed that it would investigate the military's human rights abuses. Before coming into government, Lagos was a principal figure in fostering these illusions. "Ricardo Lagos was one of the staunchest advocates of participating in the 1988 plebiscite with the objective of resuscitating democracy," says his election biography.

While official unemployment during the first eight years of Concertacion averaged 6 percent (down from double-digit figures under Pinochet) the bulk of the jobs created for young people were either temporary or casualised contract labour. The minimum wage is only US\$178 a month.

Many of the jobs were in forestry, fishery and agricultural industries that are labour-intensive, poorly-paid and export-oriented. Some workers earn as little as US\$15 a day, with no work conditions and no right to form trade unions. They can be hired and fired at will. These super-exploited workers are among the four million people, or almost a quarter of the population who continue to live in poverty in Chile.

At the same time the wealth for the richest 10 percent has increased and now accounts for 45.8 percent of the nation's income. The wealthiest four families—Angelini, Said, Matte, Luksic—have reaped a bonanza, controlling combined assets worth US\$5.3 billion. Chile also ranks second highest in eight South American countries in terms of salaries for top company executives. CEOs in Chile earn an average of US\$213,820 a year.

Leading financial institutions have hailed the economy as a

success and attributed the 5 percent yearly growth rates to the Concertacion's policies. Earlier in the year International Monetary Fund head Michel Camdessus said Chile "attested to the sound stance of its economic policies... structural reform in such areas as privatisation, trade liberalisation, and pension reform extending them into a second generation of reforms of education, health and the legal system."

In October 1998, however, the Chilean economy entered its deepest recession since 1982, and contracted for 11 months in a row. Its Asian markets dried up, slashing 35 percent of Chile's exports. Foreign direct investment declined US\$400 million, from US\$5.4 billion to US\$5 billion. A worldwide slump in commodity prices dealt a major blow to the economy, with 40 percent of exports dependent on the sale of copper.

High interest rates forced a fall in industrial activity, severely affecting construction and manufacturing, which downsized over two thirds of its workforce.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, the economic slowdown increased unemployment from 6 percent to 11.4 percent—nearly double. These figures do not include people who work an hour a week. Unofficial estimates place the jobless figure at closer to 1.7 million.

Over the last year, tens of thousands of workers, youth and students have been in pitched battles with the government over layoffs and cuts to university subsidies.

Finance Minister Eduardo Aninat nevertheless promised international investors he would deliver a fiscally responsible budget, with accelerated privatisation of public utilities and services, while suppressing wage demands. The government will increase spending by no more than 3.3 percent in the 2000 budget. The IMF lauded the government's efforts and foreign investment increased to a record US\$8.4 billion this year, rising 82.7 percent from 1998.

Most analysts predict a close Lagos victory in the elections. Any remaining illusions in the PS will soon be punctured. Its record in office since 1990 serves as an indication of what Lagos will do; deepen the economic agenda demanded by world financial markets, while continuing to collaborate with the military he once claimed to oppose.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>