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Chile

Chilean elections – Debacle for the regime’s parties

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Introductory note:

Like many of my generation, I remember watching the Chilean airplanes bomb the presidential palace of Salvador Allende as part of Pinochet's coup in September 1973. Allende died in the armed attack. He died bravely but his reformist project and trust in the armed forces resulted in a historic defeat of working people both for Chile and the whole of Latin America as fascist-like military dictatorships took power violently in other countries like Argentina.

As many as 30,000 activists were slaughtered and thousands went into exile, including in Britain. We organised huge solidarity campaigns and practical help for the exiles. Pinochet ruled directly for 17 years and won a referendum in 1980 ratifying his neo-liberal, repressive regime. In 1988 55% voted against him in another referendum that led to democratic reforms and new elections.

A new government, the Concertacion made up of the Christian Democrats and Socialist Party carried through further democratic reforms but allowed Pinochet to remain commander in chief until 1988. His neo-liberal economic policies that increased poverty and hardship were not fundamentally dismantled. Since the 1990s the moderate left Socialist Party and the right-wing have alternated in power.

In October 2019 under the right-wing Pinera government mass protests broke out initially over the costs of transport as secondary students coordinated protests in Santiago. Other issues were taken up such as corruption, privatised education, and inequality. Over a million people took part in a national demo on 25 October. More than 30 people were killed and many were injured during the brutal repression.

Pinera was forced to concede a vote on whether to hold a constitutional convention to rewrite the constitution. On 25 October 2020 Chileans voted 78% in favour of this process. The elections last Saturday and Sunday 15/16 May 2021 elected representatives to this constitutional assembly.

Below I have translated an immediate analysis by Franck Gaudichaud. *Dave Kellaway*

Elections this Sunday in Chile brought big upsets:

- the debacle of the traditional parties,
- the "night of the long knives" within the right-wing,
- the beginning of the end for the heirs of Pinochet,
- a huge defeat for President Sebastián Piñera – which he acknowledged himself–

- the victory of the popular movement...

Since yesterday afternoon, the Chilean press began to multiply the superlatives to describe the political earthquake that has just shaken the Andes, from the Atacama Desert to the cold lands of the Magallanes region. Chileans were called to the polls on Saturday 15 and Sunday 16 May for four simultaneous elections: to re-elect mayors, councillors, and regional governors and to elect a Constitutional Convention to draft a new Constitution for the Republic.

No one, least of all the pollsters, had foreseen such an upheaval, even though the isolation of the government was evident and the rejection of the political "caste" had been strong for years. Despite the power of the popular revolt of October 2019 and its impact on the entire institutional landscape, people were rather cautious about possible transformations resulting from these elections.

Attention was particularly focused on the elections to the Constitutional Convention; a hotly contested election that sought to put an end to the neoliberal Magna Carta promulgated 41 years ago during the Pinochet dictatorship. There were many obstacles put in the way of the popular movement of opposition to the regime:

- The nature of the electoral system for these elections,

- the unity of the right and the extreme right under a single banner (that of "Chile Vamos"),

- the pact signed within Parliament to ensure that the future Constitution would be validated by a qualified two-thirds majority,

- the financial and media dominance of the main parties that have governed the country for the last thirty years,

- the difficulties encountered by militants of the social movement to achieve legal candidacies,

- the great fragmentation of the camp of independents and the hesitations of the left,

- the pandemic and the economic crisis.

The results have profoundly changed the situation

First, with regard to the Constitutional Convention, the right-wing coalition had to swallow its arrogance. Its leaders seemed confident that they would win at least a third of the seats (52 out of 155), thus securing a blocking minority and a right of veto over all articles of the future Constitution. They failed. With just over 23% of the vote, "Chile Vamos" will have to settle for 37 seats. It is also punishment and a humiliation for the President, Piñera, who has been responsible for the crisis his country has been experiencing for months.

Another surprise is that the balance of power within the left-wing opposition has been largely reversed. The list that brought together the Communist Party and the Frente Amplio (Broad Front), which emerged strengthened from the movements of the 2010s, triumphed with 28 seats (18% of the votes cast). On the other hand, the social-liberal

parties of the former Concertación, which governed from 1990 to 2010 without questioning the economic legacy of the dictatorship, won only 25 seats. 15 are for the Socialist Party and only 2 for the Christian Democracy.

However, the left and centre-left will only represent a third of the assembly. The real surprise was the magnitude of the vote in favour of the "independents", who won a total of 48 seats, definitively marking the massive rejection of political parties. This is a very heterogeneous group of candidates, which also includes notorious conservatives. But a majority is critical of the authoritarian and neoliberal legacy of the last decades. This is generally the case with the candidates of the "People's List", which brought together representatives of social movements and organised civil society. With 24 seats, it brought figures from the October revolt, such as "Aunt Pikachu" and several leaders of the feminist movement to the Constituent Assembly. Alondra Carillo, leader of the Coordinadora Feminista 8 de Marzo, was also elected on a list made up of independents and social movements. Moreover, in these elections, women obtained much better results than men, and indeed some of them even had to give up their seats in the name of respecting parity within the Constitutional Convention...

Thus, if the right-wing loses the right of veto it had hoped for, alliances between representatives of the social and political left could make it possible to win two-thirds of the assembly and begin - at last - to deconstruct Chilean neoliberalism.

The anger was also expressed at the ballot box in the municipal and regional governors' elections, the results of which will have to be analysed in more detail. [1] Jorge Sharp (anti-neoliberal left) was comfortably re-elected in Valparaíso, as was Daniel Jadue, the communist mayor of the municipality of Recoleta in the metropolitan region (with more than 64% of the votes cast). Very popular, Jadue is a declared candidate for the presidential elections to be held in six months' time. This is enough to make the right-wing and the social liberals tremble a little more. In Santiago, Ms. Irací Hassler, a thirty-year-old feminist and communist activist won against right-winger. Felipe Alessandri, who became notorious for his misogynist and anti-communist statements during the campaign. At the governor level, the victory of Rodrigo Mundaca in Valparaíso, an environmental activist and defender of water as a common good, was celebrated with euphoria and joy by many activists from social and environmental organisations.

What kind of Chile should be built to finally bury the dictatorship?

The crisis of representation and legitimacy of the parties and the institutional system is not only reflected in the vote. Abstention was also historically high with 61.4% of the electorate! This was even more so in the popular municipalities, in places exceeding more than 65%, sometimes even 70%. Thus, a majority of citizens did not feel engaged by this political event. Some of those who mobilised in October 2019 called on people to boycott the "electoral circus" in order to continue fighting in the streets. For the most part, Chileans continue to show their indifference or mistrust towards those "at the top", be they from the right or the left, from the parties or even independents.

While the Constitutional Convention is due to sit for 9 to 12 months, the November presidential elections will once again raise the question: what kind of Chile should be built to completely break with the dictatorship?

Here are some additional points made by Francisco Salinas, the co-editor of the Social Theory Notebooks of the Laboratory of Social Transformations at the Diego Portales University. His whole article is here on [Labour Hub](#).

These results represent an overwhelming victory for the ideas of change that have been underway in social mobilisations for over 15 years. These had their high point during the mass struggles starting from 18 October 2019. Some people gave us up for dead, that we were not representative, that we were polarising. But the truth is that we were constructing and articulating a social force that knows that changes have to be made, but that was still not a majority.

Today we are all contributing to finding each other and constructing a majority that expresses the diversity of political and social organisation in a convention that will enable us to open a new cycle in Chile. It will enable us to twist and shift the neoliberal paradigm in Chile. And the first challenge that we will have is to assure conditions for the active participation of citizens.

(...) This election made official the representation of indigenous groups in the writing of the new constitution. There were 17 protected seats for these people, many of whom are campaigning for the return of their lands and the recognition of the country as multinational. The person with the most votes in this group was Machi Francisca Linconao, a Mapuche spiritual leader who was unjustly charged and linked to acts of murder and terrorism. Probably, as a symbolic reparation and a symbol of a new Chile, some even think of her as a good candidate to chair the assembly.

(...) Overall, plurality and a desire for social justice are a mark of this newly elected body. Constanza Schönhaut, elected representative for the constituent assembly from left-wing party Convergencia Social (Social Convergence) expressed the following when I asked her to give her insights about the election for this report:

We are confident that this constituent process has to face the people; it has to include all the voices that have been excluded during the last 30 to 40 years. It has to be done together with the feminists, with the ecologists, with the different unions, with the councils, and different territorial organisations. And that is where we will be: because we need a constituent assembly that is open and a new Constitution that becomes a useful tool to achieve social justice.

Jennifer Pérez, elected representative for the left-wing party Igualdad (Equality) for the Town Council of Independencia, a middle and low-income borough in Santiago, told me the following:

We are very happy that the outcome of the organisation surrounding the constituent, sovereign, and popular movement of the borough of Independencia was being able to give birth to a people’s councillor. It has been hard work that has its roots in the neighbourhoods, from the borough’s slumps, and has been able to genuinely represent the diversity in the territory.

We think that today we can already make some important analyses of the elections and I can guarantee that in other territories that was the perfect recipe: organising collective spaces that have the potential to transcend the institutions. Those were the projects that won, without a doubt. So, this will be a big challenge and a process that will provide us with great lessons. The people always respond when the work is genuine and is transparent to them.

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Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] For those who can read Castilian here is a link to the [detailed results](#).