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Chile

Is a new political cycle opening up in Chile?

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The rejection of the new right-wing Constitution reflects a “national political” stalemate in which none of the sectors in dispute have managed to impose their programme. For the next stage it is necessary to build a political force which is able to strike together.

On Sunday 17 December 2023, for the second time in just over a year, Chileans voted in a referendum “for” or “against” a draft new Constitution, which would put an end to the one promulgated in 1980 during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (and altered several times since 1989). This new national election takes place four years after the great social revolt of 2019, which shook the five decades of neoliberal hegemony established in the Andean country, and two years after the election of Gabriel Boric, the young president of the progressive left (supported by a coalition of the Communist Party and the Broad Front, in alliance with part of the old Concertación which governed during the post-dictatorship transition).

The first constitutional plebiscite of 2022 was to “approve” or “reject” the proposal for a new constitution drafted by a Convention composed mainly of anti-neoliberal representatives and with the participation of indigenous peoples, social movements and with gender parity. It was a project that included decades of social struggles and aspired to a democratic Chile based on broad social rights. This Sunday's plebiscite, on the contrary, was drafted by a Council with an extreme right majority headed by the Republican Party, which deepened the political regime of the 1980 constitution and restricted social rights.

A class vote

Once again, more than 15 million Chileans were called to vote: 55.8% opposed the new constitutional text, although 15% of voters did not go to the polls, despite the voting system which mandated automatic voter registration (again in effect from 2022). Once again, in the capital there was a class vote, as in the rest of the country: while the 3 richest municipalities in the country voted “in favour”, the popular municipalities in the south and west of the capital declared themselves more than 60%, or even 70%, “against”. Only two regions of the Andean country voted by a majority in favour of the latest draft Constitution, drafted as it was by the right. However, big capital and its media have invested more than 130 million pesos in the campaign to defend the new text and a constitution that would definitively prevent any legislation in favour of abortion, that would safeguard the funded pension system, which would consolidate the commodification of water, education and health, and which would enshrine the prohibition overall of collective bargaining, while protecting one of the most reactionary rights to strike in Latin America.

A defeat for Antonio Kast's party of the extreme right

In September 2022, more than 62% of the population had already rejected a constitutional proposal, but in this case a clearly left-wing, equal and feminist Magna Carta, which proclaimed a “plurinational” state and recognised new rights for indigenous peoples. For many voters, it was about overcoming – at least in part – the neoliberal subsidiary state and an extractivist and ecocidal development model, inherited from Pinochet and his “Chicago Boys.” In this month of December, the rejection is expressed again, but in the face of a text written by the extreme and traditional right, within the framework of a process much more “controlled” by the traditional parties and parliament, attached to “technical committees of admissibility” and to commissions of “experts”. The 50 members (elected in May 2023) of

the Constitutional Council were led by a relative majority attached to the Republican Party of José Antonio Kast, a new extreme right that has emerged strongly in the last three years, which has emerged as a “return to order” force with an openly racist, anti-immigrant, patriarchal, conservative and ultra-securitarian discourse in the face of the collective rebellion of October 2019, against the powerful feminist movement and its demands, against the Boric government and its “late progressivism”. In alliance with the right, the Republican Party believed it could draft a Constitution in its own image and likeness, that of the “true Chileans” in the words of the president of the Council, the very reactionary and fundamentalist Lutheran Beatriz Hevia. With the result of the last referendum, the Republican Party has just suffered its first clear defeat. Above all, because Kast already saw himself as a new presidential candidate with a real chance of winning at the end of 2025. The knives are also out between the coalition of the traditional conservative-neoliberal right (Chile Vamos), around figures like Evelyn Mattei, and the Republican clan, each seeking to evade responsibility for the debacle. Dissidence is also appearing within the extreme right with some leaders or opinionologists such as Axel Kaiser seeking to create a “libertarian party”, even more radical than Kast and copied from Javier Milei’s model in Argentina. These differentiations and tensions within the right-wing camp are destined to grow in importance in the coming months, creating a possible window of political opportunity for the social and political left.

A government without Boric, a government without reforms

On the night of the result, President Boric once again spoke of national consensus, while confirming that the constituent process had come to an end after these two rejections, recognising that the “social emergencies” were now elsewhere. The young president, instead of taking advantage of this right-wing defeat at the polls, repeated a self-flagellating speech criticising the supposed “radicality” of the first constitutional proposal of 2021-2022, and rejecting any “polarisation” of the country:

“It is time to recognise the result achieved by those who raised the option against, but without forgetting that an important part of those who went to the polls voted for the option in favour. We cannot repeat the same mistake of the previous plebiscites. Every one of us constitutes the country and those who triumph in an election cannot ignore or do without those who are circumstantially defeated. Our country will continue with the current Constitution because after two plebiscite constitutional proposals, neither has managed to represent and unite Chile in its beautiful diversity. The country became polarised, divided, and regardless of this overwhelming result, the constitutional process failed to channel the hopes of having a new Constitution written for everyone.”

In general, several government officials recognise that this result brings some “fresh air” to an executive that has been characterised since its inception by a weak capacity for change and some timid and contradictory reforms (advances in free health care, decrease in weekly working time and increase in the minimum wage). What marks the Boric administration above all is its lack of even minimal will to confront the dominant and business sectors and to try to mobilise popular sectors “from below”, while, apart from the Communist Party (Partido Comunista/PC), it has no real link with the working and subordinate sectors. As a minority in Parliament, locked into a parliamentary logic and management of the state apparatus, and having failed to impose his tax reform, Boric increasingly depends on the Socialist Party and its allies (pillars of neoliberalism since 1990), who have entered the seat of the Chilean Presidency, La Moneda, with strength and are embodied by Minister of the Interior, Carolina Tohá. Mired in a corruption case (the Caso Convenios or Agreements Case) and faced with a systematic and terribly effective bombardment by capitalist media monopolies that focused public debates on drug trafficking, insecurity and the rejection of migrants, the government has to suffer more than simply promoting the political agenda. Along these lines, and despite the protests of many honest militants or the criticism of leaders such as the communist mayor of Recoleta, Daniel Jadue, the government has continued to militarise the Mapuche territory of Wallmapu, whilst defending the Carabineros (police) and broad impunity for those responsible for the repression of October 2019, as well as proposing laws that criminalise struggles for the right to housing. The presence of figures from the left such as

the Minister and spokesperson of the General Secretary of Government, Camila Vallejo, does not change this general orientation, which is also causing ongoing demobilisation among the bases of both the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) and the PC.

A new political cycle and perspectives for the social movements

Sunday's elections undeniably mark the end of a political cycle. Paradoxical elements of continuity can be discerned at the heart of these two referendums, and even in the wake of October 2019: clearly, the crisis of hegemony, the rejection of the political "caste" and the dissatisfaction with the lack of solutions to the main popular demands are still with us, in different ways and with different strategic orientations. If the profound impact that the media and social networks had on the electoral results of both plebiscites are discounted, in any case, it can be ascertained that the vote "against something" weighs more than the vote "in favour of something." This reflects a situation of national political stalemate, in which none of the actors in dispute manage to impose their programme or convince the population of their proposals to exit the crisis. Neither the massive irruption of the people in October 2019, nor the anti-neoliberal majority of the 2021 Convention, nor the progressivism in the government since 2022, nor the Pinochet majority of the Council of 2023: none of these expressions of the crisis have represented a way out.

In this situation, the main threat to the popular sectors of Chile is the successful emergence of a far-right political force that manages to capitalise on the defeats of all the actors mentioned above. Needless to say, Milei's triumph in Argentina influences this intuition. But in a scenario of political polarisation, when a progressive government has been unable to fulfill its programme, it is not unreasonable to envision a next right/far-right government, and this explains why the main presidential figures in the polls today are Kast and Matthei.

Faced with this odious scenario, the left and the social, feminist and popular movements have the obligation to draw strategic lessons from the last four years. On the one hand, the programmatic moderation that the ruling party has embodied has had the effect, of disappointing its electoral base and refusing to adopt paths of popular mobilisation to counteract the opposition's parliamentary blockade. When faced with stubborn opposition, the government prefers to remove its pretense of change and ends up "successfully" approving projects stripped of their initial intention, sending a clear message: in times of crisis, there is no alternative to programmatic surrender. There is no room to support a programme of change, no room for mobilising the social bases. Seen in this way, the government has renounced precisely the little it can do in times of crisis and parliamentary blockade: that is, to use that small fraction of power to force an open confrontation over the programme and highlight the positions of each actor in dispute. On the contrary, it has preferred to reissue the elitarian "politics of agreements", at the heights, without the people who characterised the social-liberal center-left of the transition.

On the other hand, the left and the social movements would do well to take advantage of this moment of opening and closing to make a profound self-criticism about the organisational dispersion that sectoral struggles imply, each one in its field or territory, without the construction of a common space for the dispute for power built around a transversal programme for class independence. A notable exception to this has been the case of feminism developed around the Feminist General Strike promoted by the March 8 Feminist Coordination, which has sought to make feminism a global vision that can programmatically and organisationally confront all national problems.

In classical terms, this new cycle will confront the left and social movements with the problem of party building, in terms of developing a political force capable of striking unified blows in a common direction. This requires, first of all, identifying the reasons why the October rebellion failed to impose by its own means the terms of the solution to the crisis, and why it had to be transmuted into a constituent process agreed upon and designed by and from the Congress. Rather than blaming the "traitors" on duty who would have perverted the power of the social revolt, this

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closing of the cycle forces us to think about our own shortcomings: a dispersion of social demands without reference to the common thread of structural causes of the crisis of Chilean/global neoliberal capitalism, an archipelago of organisations without common activity other than street mobilisation, a disconnection between the militant nuclei and the mobilised mass, and the persistence of artisanal modes of organisation that were not able to take advantage of the massive and popular irruption of the revolt to construct new alternative political references with a national presence.

If the main threat in Chile to the popular camp today is a rise of the extreme right, then the order of the day must be to identify all the ways in which it is possible to take responsibility to stop this regressive process inch by inch and share how to do this. We believe that this happens mainly through the resurgence of demands that can remove the Chilean working class from the growing precariousness it experiences, and a political force that connects these solutions with a heritage of profound transformation, at the root, that breaks with the prevailing political and economic regime that puts the brakes on a transformative solution to the crisis. If Kast and other Chilean neofascist expressions represent a way out of the crisis with conservative, authoritarian and nationalist characteristics which reinforce the regime, then the path for the left and social movements will have to be a path of social struggles and class conflict, feminist and ecosocialist and thoroughly anticapitalist, aimed at exploding the causes of the crisis, while resolving its most immediate symptoms with short-term material solutions. Without this combination, the extreme right will continue to have a free path to convince the popular sectors that current progressivism is not on their side, and that the only solution is to trust in their platform of competition of the penultimate against the last.

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Translated by David Fagan for *International Viewpoint* from [Jacobin América Latina](#).

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