



Photo by Gabriel Ebenberger.

A crowded Transantiago subway station.

CHILE

# The Sorcerer's Apprentice

By Kirsten Sehnbruch

“Hey, gordito! Time to lose some weight. As of next week, gorditos like you won’t be allowed on the buses or the metro anymore. You take up too much space!” goes a joke circulating around Santiago at the moment.

That is, among the people who are still capable of laughing. Mostly, though, the faces around the city are as long as the queues at the bus stops.

Santiago’s new public transportation system, the by now infamous Transantiago, has seriously shaken Michelle Bachelet’s government, just in time for its first anniversary celebrations. In fact, since it directly affects the everyday lives

of at least one-third of the country’s electorate, it constitutes the most serious crisis that the Concertación, the coalition that so far has successfully governed Chile since 1990, has had to face.

What has gone wrong for President Bachelet?

Michelle Bachelet was catapulted into the public limelight when Ricardo Lagos appointed her as his minister of defense. Never had a woman held such a position in the Americas. Bachelet’s personal background meant that she was the perfect person for the job at the time. Soon, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, the relatively inexperienced Michelle Bachelet took off in Chile’s public opinion polls,

rather unexpectedly ending up as the governing coalition's frontrunner for the presidency.

Things got slightly out of hand, however, during the first round of the 2005 presidential election campaign. It seemed Bachelet's team of advisors lacked direction, coherence and, above all, political experience. It also became clear that the candidate herself was no strong leader. The apprentice's broom was chopped in half during the first cabinet reshuffle — only 103 days after taking office — occasioned by a muddled (some critics say incompetent) handling of protests by schoolchildren, which brought thousands into the street and highlighted all the unresolved problems in Chile's education system.

Several corruption scandals, a few mishandled political appointments, a reduced economic growth rate and a string of ministerial faux pas later, the sense in Chile this spring is that the government has lost control of the political agenda. In an attempt to reign in her brooms and close the flood gates, Bachelet again reshuffled her cabinet. In the absence of the old sorcerer, a new one was called in to clean up the mess: René Cortázar, the former labor minister of President Aylwin and an old hand at steering through a political storm, was appointed as the new transport minister and charged with sorting out the Transantiago.

Cortázar will indeed have to work some magic to resolve this crisis, but resolve it he must. Additional resources will be made available, more buses will be put on the streets and the system will be reorganized to stem the worst of the tide of discontent coursing through a population unused to having to hop onto two or three different buses and a metro instead of the one bus route used before. By the end of the year, the crisis will have been resolved. Santiaguinos will have got used to the Transantiago, and the government will most likely be dealing with other issues. Probably. Hopefully.

Nonetheless, the Transantiago crisis prompts several questions. The most immediate one is why this government seems so disoriented and inept compared to its predecessor.

When she campaigned for office, Michelle Bachelet promised Chileans a new leadership style, new faces in office, gender parity in the cabinet and a government for the citizens (*gobierno ciudadano*). New faces, however, also significantly reduce the stock of political experience. And in practice, the *gobierno ciudadano* seems to mean that the president and her ministers have distanced themselves from the political parties in their coalition. Although her cabinet nominations have respected the required equilibrium between parties, Bachelet did not necessarily pick those

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Chilean students protest for education reform.



Photo: Associated Press.

candidates the party leaderships put forward.

This is a president's prerogative. But it is also a risk. Disgruntled coalition partners are unlikely to be cooperative. The somewhat choppy relations between the executive and its supporting parties have further weakened Bachelet's position, despite her parliamentary majority. Most recently, a relatively straightforward legislative proposal for accelerated depreciation by her finance minister, Andrés Velasco, was voted down by a recalcitrant congress. This does not bode well for future legislative proposals, especially not for the more controversial ones such as the reform of Chile's pension system.

Even after her second cabinet reshuffle, it is not clear that President Bachelet has put together the right team for the years ahead. As long as her brooms continue to sweep independently of each other rather than being reigned in to some sort of order, the sensation in Chile will be that of a government adrift.

Yet there are other explanations for why things are going wrong in Chile, too. After 17 years in office, one could ask whether the Concertación has simply been in power for too long. Are the niggling corruption scandals that seem to be dogging this administration as well as the last one a sign of the coalition's complacency?

Personally, I do not subscribe to this point of view. It is always difficult to quantify corruption, especially in a developing democracy such as Chile's. Is there really more corruption, or are we just more likely to find out about it? In any case, compared to other Latin American countries or even the present U.S. administration, Chilean corruption scandals seem negligible. More transparency is undoubtedly a good thing and will strengthen democracy in Chile. But it is not the root cause of the government's troubles.

A more likely culprit is the binominal electoral system which encourages political infighting not only within the governing coalition parties but also within the opposition coalition. Chile's election system means that parties are more likely to increase their number of representatives by

taking votes away from their coalition partners than from the opposition. So while the pathologically divided rightwing opposition in Chile is clearly savoring the government's misfortunes, it has thus far been unable to put together a viable alternative strategy.

This is not a healthy foundation for a functioning democracy. The fact that Bachelet's government is weak and relatively undisciplined merely serves to highlight and exacerbate problems that have existed since Chile's transition to democracy in 1990.

While Chile's autopilot still functions (as always remarkably well compared to other Latin American countries), resolving the deeper structural issues that the country now has to confront requires much more than an autopilot. The Concertación has already undertaken what could be described as the "easy" or "obvious" reforms, meaning those that generate a relatively broad consensus and bring immediate results.

In the area of education, for example, participation in both elementary and secondary education has increased to levels observed in developed countries. However, in international tests of educational standards, Chile lags significantly behind other countries with a similar level of development. How does one now set about improving the quality of education? Above all, how does one provide young people with equal opportunities

in a country with one of the world's most unequal income distribution curves?

These questions are much more difficult to tackle (not least because they require taking on the teachers' union as well as the opposition, which sponsors many private and subsidized educational institutions). They also throw up some fundamental concerns, such as whether Chile's educational system is really able to produce equal opportunities given its current structure. Issues like these pitch the opposing sides of the debate into fierce battles based on ideological and historical premises, while yet another year passes without any real change; a year in which the gap in educational achievement between Chile and its



Photo by Tamara Sancy

Rush hour in Santiago.



Photo courtesy of www.presidentia.cl.

President Michelle Bachelet (left) reviews the Transantiago plan with Minister of Transportation Sergio Espejo (center), who has since resigned.

Asian counterparts, who have little time for ideological bickering and focus on practical results, is likely to widen.

Beyond this, there are even more fundamental issues at stake. Where is Chile going? Is the Concertación's much praised development model sputtering? How much longer can Chile continue to generate the kind of economic growth it needs exporting only copper and a few other agricultural products with little added value? And what should be the role of the state in all this? Does the Transantiago crisis illustrate the need for greater state involvement in the provision of basic services, or does it highlight the state's failure to provide these services efficiently? Perhaps the most controversial question of them all is whether the state can deliver the standard of living average Chileans are aspiring to given its limited tax revenues.

It seems less than likely that the current government will introduce these issues into the public debate, let alone tackle them. On April 22, Bachelet again laid out her vision of government. It is a good thing for presidents to have a vision of where they want to take their country. However, it helps if this vision includes concrete policy objectives. Vague aspirations such as "promoting more participative politics" in which the "citizenry takes on the role of protagonist" or

constructing "a more inclusive society" are too abstract and hardly serve as a foundation for a serious policy discussion of the specific issues Chile has to face with regard to its future development.

One well-known analyst recently likened the country to a toad sitting in a pot of water that is gradually brought to the boil. While its politicians, intellectuals and policy makers are sitting around debating, they are missing the opportunity to jump before the water gets too hot.

I am inclined to agree. Having said that, I am not yet prepared to abandon hope for this presidential term. Michelle Bachelet has shown a remarkable capacity to regenerate her political capital. Chileans still like and broadly support her. If she can display the warm smile that got her elected often enough in public while simultaneously reasserting her leadership, improving relations with her coalition partners and allowing her ministers to put together a coherent political agenda, she may yet recoup some of the lost ground. But it will require no small degree of inspiration, direction and a good portion of political magic.

Kirsten Sehnbruch is Senior Scholar and Lecturer at CLAS.