

# Bachelet: Sí!

By Kirsten Sehnbruch



Photo by Beatriz Manz.

Bachelet supporters march in Santiago before the election.

## A Woman!

Euphoria erupted on the night of January 25, 2006, as Chile celebrated the election of its first female president, Michelle Bachelet. Hopes for a new style of politics, further progress on the country's outstanding human rights cases, a greater emphasis on social inclusion and an eradication of poverty reverberated among the celebrating voters. "Who would have said, 10, 15 years ago, that a woman would be elected president?" Bachelet asked ecstatically during her victory speech.

A member of Chile's Socialist Party — which has been part of the country's center-left governing coalition since the country transitioned to democracy in 1990 after the 17-year dictatorship of General Pinochet — Bachelet defeated her opponent from the right wing coalition, Sebastián Piñera, with a sound 53.5 percent of the votes following a campaign

that demonstrated all the strengths of Chile's governing coalition as well as her own personal appeal and capacity.

## The Remarkable and the Unremarkable

These elections were in many ways remarkable and at the same time also wholly unremarkable. They were remarkable for four reasons: first, because for the first time in its history, Chile elected a female president. We could even go so far as to say that for the first time in Latin America, a woman was elected purely based on her own merit (i.e. not because she is the widow of an assassinated politician).

The Chilean elections were further remarkable because they returned Chile's governing, center-left coalition, the Concertación, to office for a fourth term, which will lead to a 20 year period of uninterrupted government. Conversely, the

opposition parties on the right will have spent 20 years out of power. In Chile's case, this is an indication of the successful administration of the governing coalition and not a sign of corruption or abuse of power.

Third, by Latin American standards, the Chilean elections were also remarkable for the quality, integrity and capability of the main presidential candidates. Several Chileans said to me during the campaign period: "I'm going to vote for Bachelet/Piñera, but I don't really mind who wins. They're both very capable, and they have good teams." The same could also be said for the contenders in the Concertación's primaries.

Fourth, these elections showed the remarkable progress that Chile has made over the last 16 years. The country's consistently high economic growth rates combined with a strong focus on social policies have produced the most significant reduction in poverty rates seen in Latin America over the last decades and led to widespread acceptance of Chile's development strategy. The concerns of the Chilean electorate today mirror those of developed countries: education, healthcare, the pension system, employment, discrimination and crime. It is a measure of how quickly the country's culture has changed in recent years that, after having implemented a divorce law only in 2004, the candidates were being asked about their views on homosexual marriage, a subject that would have been considered taboo during the elections in 1999.

At the same time, these elections were also unremarkable in that they contained few surprises. The right-wing opposition was as riven with conflict as ever, and the personal rivalries among its principal politicians ultimately stymied any hopes of victory, despite Piñera's significant achievement in forcing Bachelet into a run-off.

The campaigns also brought out the conflicts within the governing coalition, in particular the personal rivalries between party heavyweights within the Christian Democrat party. But as on previous occasions, when it came to the crunch, the cracks in the Concertación were quickly cemented up. The coalition thus ultimately succeeded in presenting a much more united

front than the right.

The historical factors that have influenced voting in Chile since 1990 still mattered as much in these elections as in previous ones. Whether the candidates had supported or opposed the Pinochet regime in the plebiscite of 1988 was a subject that came up again and again during the presidential debates and in the general political discourse. Bachelet herself frequently referred to what she and her family had suffered as a result of the dictatorship's human rights abuses, while conservative candidate Joaquín Lavín, who had worked in the Pinochet administration during the late 1980s, studiously avoided the subject. Meanwhile Piñera repeatedly emphasized the fact that he had voted against the dictatorship in 1988 in order to distance himself from his more right-wing rival.

Also, as in previous elections, the government itself was by no means a neutral actor. Many of its senior officials were involved in designing Bachelet's political program, and even more officials from all levels of government were extremely active in organizing and running the Concertación's election campaign on the ground, often during office hours, which led the right to accuse them of abusing state resources.

Above all, the political trend towards the center has continued, making it increasingly difficult for parties and candidates to differentiate themselves, especially as the political debates between the candidates rarely moved beyond broad generalizations and included almost no real debate of fundamental issues.

Furthermore, the election campaign was again marked by an attitude of nonconfrontation: while there was some bickering, there was no serious mud-slinging. Strong language and personal attacks were largely avoided, as was any close examination of past voting records.

### **The More Things Change...**

Bachelet's campaign and political program illustrate the extent to which her administration represents continuity. Fundamental policy shifts from this new government are unlikely, but an accelerated pace of reform is possible, especially considering the fact that for the

# Bachelet: Sí!

continued from previous page



Photo by Getty Images.

Michelle Bachelet poses with the members of her new cabinet, half of whom are women.

first time since 1990 Bachelet commands a parliamentary majority, which will accord her a greater degree of political freedom than her predecessors.

Her government's biggest and most important battle is likely to be the reform of the pension system, which leaves at least 50 percent of the Chilean workforce without even a minimum pension. However, a broad consensus will have to be achieved for this reform as the political power behind the pension funds is entrenched, and votes from the right will be needed to pass any new legislation. It is likely that her government will attempt to introduce a series of changes to the system aimed at increasing its coverage and contributions as well as the competition between individual fund management companies. However, since any genuine competition would significantly reduce the profitability of these companies, it is unlikely that the government will succeed in implementing any fundamental changes, which are violently opposed by the right.

Additionally, any successful reform of the

pension system will have to convince workers that it is worth contributing to the system. At the moment, most think that contributing is equal to pouring money down the drain. This opinion is unlikely to be changed by a reform consisting of half measures which is the likely outcome of negotiations between the government and the opposition. In short, significant progress on the matter is unlikely.

The same holds true for social reforms in the areas of health, education, labor and social welfare. Structural changes, including significant increases in spending, would have to be negotiated with the opposition. But the advisors closely associated with Bachelet's campaign appear to be focused on pension reform and unwilling to take on other battles.

In any case, this government will have much less time to act than the previous two Concertación administrations, which could look forward to six years in office. Due to constitutional reforms implemented by the Lagos government, Bachelet will only have four years, and she will not be eligible for reelection.

During the election campaigns, we saw both Bachelet's strengths and weaknesses. She made some mistakes, put her foot in it on several occasions and dithered every now and again. But she also showed capacity for leadership, great personal appeal and genuine warmth and sincerity. The cabinet that she nominated following the elections proves that she is her own master and will not be pushed around by political parties, even if she owes them a debt for her election victory. The first in the Americas to be based on a principle of gender parity, her cabinet consists of an array of mainly new faces, just as she had promised during her campaign. Bachelet has shown, too, that she is not averse to running risks. Many of her appointments lack high-level political experience, and even more surprisingly, they are not all fully backed by their parties. This could lead to problems and a loss of valuable time in a four-year administration if the political parties, or factions within them, decide to block legislation that she proposes. On the other hand, if her new ministers perform well, Bachelet will be hailed as a political genius who has changed the style of politics in Chile.

At this stage, it is difficult to predict whether

Bachelet's bets will pay off. If her government performs well, she will go down in history as Chile's first female president, who did more than anyone before her to promote gender equality in Chile. However, if her administration is mediocre or worse, she will most likely pave the way for a shift to the right and may even damage the principle of gender equality.

### **And the United States?**

One last question remains: Does any of this matter to the United States? The answer is yes, as the lessons from the Chilean case are valid for the entire region. Seen from a historical perspective, Chile's progress since 1990 in entrenching democracy as a system, as well as its progress in overcoming a legacy of political and economic instability, authoritarianism and the violation of human rights is nothing less than remarkable.

Economic stability and growth, if they are combined with a strong social policy agenda that leads to a decreasing poverty rate, feed into political stability and a strengthening of democracy. The more an electorate gains through stable economic growth, the more it has to lose in a situation of political chaos

continued on page 15

An elderly man collects cardboard in Santiago to supplement his income.



Photo by AP Wide World.

## Who Is Michelle Bachelet?

Michelle Bachelet is the daughter of Angela Jeria, an archaeologist, and Alberto Bachelet, an air force general who served under President Allende. He was imprisoned following the military coup of 1973 and died of a heart attack in prison after being tortured. Bachelet herself became a militant socialist during her medical studies at the University of Chile in the early 70s and was associated with leading figures in the Chilean Youth Socialist Party.

Following her father's arrest and death, Bachelet chose not to go into exile in order to continue the now clandestine struggle against the dictatorship. Together with her mother, she was arrested and tortured in 1975 at the Villa Grimaldi, one of Chile's most infamous torture centers.

Due to her family's personal ties with the military, Bachelet and her mother were released later that year, after which they were smuggled out of the country to Australia. They later moved to East Germany, where Bachelet continued to study medicine, married and had her first child.

After her return to Chile, Bachelet specialized as a pediatrician and worked in an NGO where she looked after children who had in some way been affected by the human rights violations of the military dictatorship. With the return of democracy in 1990, she moved into jobs related more to health administration than practice as the immense challenges facing the new democratic government in the area of health policies became clear.

Bachelet entered the Health Ministry as an advisor in 1994. Three years later, somewhat disillusioned with the continued rift between civil and military relations, she chose to undertake a course of postgraduate studies in Washington D.C. on military affairs. Upon her return, she moved to the Ministry of Defense to help coordinate and modernize the military's health services.

When President Lagos assumed office in 2000, he appointed Bachelet as Minister of Health and charged her with one of the most important reforms that his government was

to undertake: the Plan Auge. This was a comprehensive reform of the country's health insurance systems that was to guarantee a range of treatments to all Chileans, regardless of whether they were insured or not. He also asked Bachelet to eliminate the endless lines at doctors' offices in the poblaciones. Both tasks were high profile, politically explosive and almost unachievable. As minister, Bachelet had to find a common ground for health reform, not only among the different opinions within the governing coalition, but also with the opposition on whose support any new legislation depended. Her efforts laid the foundation for a series of reforms which were eventually implemented in 2004.

In the course of a cabinet reshuffle in early 2002, Lagos appointed Bachelet Minister of Defense, the first time a woman had held this position in Chile or Latin America. Helped by her intimate knowledge of the military community in which she grew up, she established excellent relationships with the military leaders, who learned to trust and respect her. During her period as Minister of Defense, the 30th anniversary of the military coup was commemorated, important information was released on human rights abuses during the dictatorship, General Pinochet and leading figures of the regime were prosecuted and significant changes were agreed to regarding the Chilean military as an institution. Bachelet's role as a mediator and facilitator of all of these processes was pivotal.

When, in addition to her role as a symbolic figure of reconciliation, Bachelet oversaw the military's rescue operations during intense flooding in Santiago in 2002, her approval ratings skyrocketed. Together with her personable style of politics and her genuine warmth of character, which touched both the public and those she worked with, it was this rapid rise in the opinion polls that catapulted Bachelet into the position of a presidential candidate, even though neither her political experience nor her seniority in the coalition warranted such a move at the time.

# Bachelet: Sí!

continued from page 13

and the less credibility populist leaders with irresponsible economic programs have. The rapid deepening and strengthening of democracy in Chile illustrate this principle. The quality of the candidates and the subjects under discussion during the recent campaign are testimony to this. The rumblings of a military coup that could be heard as recently as 1993 are now unthinkable in a country that has signed a free trade agreement with the United States. Stable economic growth and a strong social policy agenda therefore remain the best guarantors of democracy.

If other Latin American countries cannot achieve this level of economic development of

their own accord, perhaps the United States could learn from the Chilean case. If the U.S. made a concerted effort to help these countries overcome poverty and create stable economic growth, this might do more to guarantee democracy in the region than sanctions and continued interference in local affairs.

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Photo by AP Wide World.

Michelle Bachelet after being sworn in as Chile's first female president.