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Chile

Why did Rejection win? Some Considerations on the Defeat of the New Text for the Chilean Constitution.

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The victory of the Rejection option on the wording of the new Chilean Constitution has raised a number of questions for internationalists. How is it possible that the struggle for the new Constitution, that was demanded by the mass popular revolt of 2019 and which was followed by a resounding victory of almost 80% in the first plebiscite that opened the constitutional process, achieved only 38% popular approval a short time later?

This question needs to be answered in the most precise way possible. The explanation for this negative result gives us a lesson, an apprenticeship in how to continue facing the coming challenges that will arise in Chile and in other Latin American countries. Certainly, this result cannot be explained by a single cause, but by a combination of them. In this brief text, we express some elements that we consider should be taken into account.

The first element lies in the character of the government of Gabriel Boric, which does not represent the aspirations arising from the popular mobilisation of 2019. It should be remembered that at a time when the people were mobilising to end what remained of the old regime, expressed in the demand for the resignation of former President Piñera, Boric voted in favour of a constitutional agreement with the right-wing in order that constitutional reform could be agreed to. The proposal for a new constitution thus born was known as the "Kitchen Pact", as the agreement was made behind the backs of the masses mobilised in the popular councils (cabildos) organised throughout the country. But, only in the first plebiscite did a majority of 80% of the voters approve the start of the constituent process and reject the proposal of the Mixed Constitutional Convention (between parliamentarians already in office and new constituent deputies), opting for a constituent assembly with more powers and which began its work from the so-called "blank page", without the provisions of the Pinochet Constitution.

During the constituent process, which had unprecedented characteristics such as gender parity and representation of indigenous peoples, the elections that brought Boric to power were held and that somehow foreshadowed last Sunday's defeat. In the first round, the former student leader was defeated by the far-right candidate (José Antonio Kast) and his victory in the second round was directly related to the more than one million voters who had not gone to the polls in the first round.

From the formation of his government to the present, his policy has been one of conciliation with the ruling classes, without confronting them with any concrete measures (which would need to be radical) to solve the problems that Chile is going through. The government wore itself out in between an inflation rate of 13% and an increase in the cost of the basic food basket that does not take into account the value of wages. As a result, his current approval rating is less than 30%.

Consequently, his policy towards the new Constitution was contradictory, hesitant, and his support was timid. Consistent with his conciliationist policy, he expressed his reservations and, together with leaders of the former Concertación, he raised the need to make changes to its regulations. In this context, the Rejection vote is also a vote of punishment against the government for its inability; that is, it is not a conscious vote of support for the right. It should be noted that an important part of the old Concertación, including the Socialist Party, supported Rejection.

In addition, the constituent deputies that were elected did not carry out a constituent process that was attractive to the population. The election of the deputies was the result of the Chilean mobilisation process. There was a majority of voters for independents and leftists and the right did not gain even a third of the seats, a proportion that would give veto power to this camp according to the 2019 Pact.

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In the country where the popular councils multiplied in 2019, the constituent process represented a disconnect with these expressions of popular organisation; those elected by the people somehow became disconnected from the people who elected them. They did not open a popular constituent process, that is, a popular consultation process with the councils of 2019, with the grassroots organisations of Chilean workers. The Chilean constitutional process searched for a course that would organise popular power, a real alternative power to the old parties of the right and the Concertación. But this was not done; discussions were confined to the constituent deputies and small sectors of the vanguard, precisely when faced with an unprecedented compulsory vote that brought more than 85% of voters to the polls, generating a negative result. This did not mean a rejection of all the advances of the new constitutional text, but rather it would have been better to prioritise those aspects closest to the working class, which would close the doors to the neoliberal model and open them for a new national economic model of the country, a concrete model.

Neither can the impact of the media disinformation campaign against the new Constitution be downplayed; it used fake news and the actions of small unrepresentative groups to set the tone of the campaign in favour of Rejection.

Despite the defeat, it is also a fact that the days of the old Pinochetist gang are numbered and that a new constituent process will soon open, in which Boric has yet again erred and marked his place in Parliament and in the parties of the regime. In order to respond to this situation, it will be necessary for the mobilised vanguard and the organisations of the working class to rekindle the flame of the mobilisation and the popular councils of 2019.

7 September 2022

Translated for International Viewpoint by David Fagan.

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