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Chile

# From revolt to process

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**Chile's Constitutional Convention elections on 15-16 May 2021 have turned the tables. Just over a year ago we said that the social outbreak of October 2019 had been the first attempt to break the conspiracy of the post-dictatorial transition against the class struggle. We also said that, faced with the popular irruption, the parties of order enabled the constitutional process in the hope of defusing the revolt and closing down from above what the people had opened from below. Finally, we said that this constitutional process, understood at the beginning as a guarantee of governability, appeared as an increasingly less predictable and controlled event, becoming a Pandora's box that, far from closing down options, has opened them at every step.**

Right at this point, the pandemic arrived in Chile, postponing the constitutional itinerary and making many feel that the revolt was becoming a thing of the past. But there is no deadline that is not met or debt that is not paid. The elections showed that the revolt is still open and that it is becoming a process, confounding both the oligarchic framework agreed upon by the parties of order and the fatalism of various sectors of the extra-parliamentary left, accustomed to predicting defeat. This time the people trusted in their own strength and won.

## **From the plebiscite of October 2020 to the creation of electoral lists**

On 25 October 2020, the Approve option was approved by 80% in the plebiscite that consulted the people whether or not they wanted a new Constitution. Previous polls correctly projected that the Approve would triumph by over 70%. Rejection prevailed in only five of the 345 municipalities of the country, one in the extreme north, another in Antarctica and the rest in the three municipalities of Santiago where the super-rich are concentrated.

The organized social world critical of the Agreement that enabled the constitutional process, called for a broad vote in the plebiscite with the aim of inflicting a resounding defeat on the right and demoralizing it, thus affirming the self-confidence of the broad popular layers. And, indeed, the overwhelming result generated enthusiasm and immediately various organizations began the discussion of raising candidacies for the Constitutional Convention.

Significant fringes of organizations decided to promote candidacies independently, that is, outside the political parties that have administered the last 30 years, as well as those that signed the Agreement and the repressive laws that followed. A wide deliberation took place, limited by the context of the pandemic, but no less latent for that. The constituent process opened in October was continuing its course and was preparing to claim the ownership that had been taken away by its petty institutional reflection.

Although people who are not active in legally constituted parties can ordinarily be candidates occupying a place in party lists, for this election, extraordinarily, independents were allowed to form their own electoral lists, something which does not happen in any other type of election, including parliamentary ones.

## **Previous forecasts**

None of the establishment pollsters dared to publish forecasts of the results of these elections. Various representatives of the parties of order argued in the hegemonic media that the Constitutional Convention would be similar to the current Parliament, that is, without significant surprises.

More or less, everyone, including popular organizations, agreed that the unity of all the right-wing parties in a single list at the national level contrasted with the dispersal of the heterogeneous opposition would translate into an over-representation of that sector in the constituent body, where it only needed a third of representatives to block any structural transformation to the model.

The only forecast close to what finally happened was by Axel Callís, political analyst and director of the DataInfluye survey, who said that in this election “a reset of everything known” could take place.

In the end the right did not achieve one third, the former *Concertación* collapsed and the revolt entered the Convention en masse. The general feeling was one of surprise. For the parties of order, a surprise that happened despite them; for the people, a surprise that happened thanks to them, a surprise that they deliberately wished for; and that desire guided the efforts and steps taken, producing the result. It just worked! When a people has experienced its strength, as in October, there is no agreement at the top that can stop its transforming will.

## The composition of the Constitutional Convention

The social pressures towards the democratization of the constituent process enabled the institutional adoption of mechanisms of participation that displaced the centrality of the classic mediations of the political system, starting with the political parties.

We have seen many times that social irruptions are incorporated into the institutional framework mediated by certain forms and actors that transform both their dynamics and their content. The particular fact that independents could participate in these elections through their own lists meant that the social revolt passed directly and scarcely mediated into the Constitutional Convention.

The Constitutional Convention is made up of 155 members, 17 of which are reserved seats for indigenous peoples, and it is based on gender parity. The right won 38 seats, of which 16 entered as independents in right-wing party quotas. The former *Concertación* (an alliance between the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats) won 25 seats, of which 11 entered as independents in the quotas of those parties. The Christian Democrats only got one seat. The alliance of the Communist Party and the *Frente Amplio* obtained 28 seats, of which 13 entered as independents in the quotas of those parties.

The independents elected on independent lists without the tutelage of parties amount to 48. Eleven of them are from the Non-Neutral Independent list, aligned with the former *Concertación* and financed by big business. Of the 155 members, only 52 are active in parties, all the others are independents from all sectors. Of the 17 seats reserved for indigenous peoples, the majority, 9 of them, are from the left, with 5 from the centre-left and 3 from the right. Leaving aside the points of entry to the Constitutional Convention, the left-wing members elected in party lists, in independent quotas, in independent lists and in reserved seats amount to 78. Those identified as centrist add up to 36. The right-wing elected 41 members.

With the exception of the list of the right and that of the former *Concertación*, in all the other lists and in the reserved

seats many more women were elected than men. Parity - unprecedented in the world for this type of process - had to be applied to correct the male under-representation. While eleven men entered the Convention under the parity correction, only five women did.

This result confirms that feminism has an inescapable political content in this period, and that in the popular field it is recognized as the legitimate bearer of the general popular aspirations for transformation. With the feminism of the social movement, the political program against the precarity of life enters the Convention.

In the coming elections, we need to fight for a parity whose result has no ceiling, that is, to maintain *entry parity* and *exit parity* that guarantees a representation of *at least* 50% of women, but without a maximum limit, as was the case in this case.

## Significant absence

From the organized social world, representation of the socio-environmental and feminist organizations of struggle, as well as the territorial assemblies and organizations, prevails. From the unorganized social world, figures prevail who were in the streets from the beginning of the revolt until now, resisting and denouncing the repression.

The revolt has entered the Convention en masse, but trade unionism has been left out. The main trade union federation in the country (CUT) ran 22 candidates, none of them successful. The same fate befell the candidacies of the unions of employees in teaching, taxation and primary health care, as well as some private sector unions, such as Unión Portuaria and Sindicato Starbucks. NO + AFP, a space that led the massive mobilizations for the end of the current private pension system and whose composition is mainly trade union based, presented 19 candidates and only one of them was elected. In contrast, two female assembly members representing non-salaried work organizations (caregivers) - jobs that have not yet found their space for participation in traditional unionism - were elected.

Numerous diagnoses and long-discussed critical balance sheets explain this lack of identification between the revolt and trades unionism. Undoubtedly, it is related to the decay of the unionism of the transition, subordinated to the parties of these last 30 years; it is also partly about the impotence of a trades unionism that fails – and in many cases has not tried - to include huge layers of informal workers, unemployed, unpaid, migrants, willing to organize and fight, but with respect to whom the trade union form has been uprooted from its organizational experience. But the fact is that unlike other transcendent debates, the programmatic and ideological debate on salaried work in the Constitutional Convention will not be made in the first person by trade union representatives. For the social movement and, in particular, for the feminist movement, the important political task of taking over the legitimate ownership of that debate remains, especially since on 29 May the Socialist Party swept the CUT elections, taking the Communist Party off the podium. This can only be done with bold organizational initiatives on this level.

## Trembling in the political centre, impotence of the right

Presidential and parliamentary elections will take place in Chile next November. Three days after the Convention elections - Wednesday, 19 May - the deadline for the political parties to register pacts to hold presidential primaries expired. That day became an opposition soap opera. While the Communist Party and the *Frente Amplio* had already agreed to hold primaries between their respective candidates to the presidency, on the eve and with the permission

of both sectors, the Socialist Party joined in with its candidate. This fact is of significant importance, since it supposed that the PS put an end to its historical alliance with the Christian Democrats, leaving it to its fate after its devastating result in the Convention.

However, at the very moment when all the parties met in the electoral offices to proceed with registration, the Socialist Party came hand in hand with the Partido por la Democracia (Party for Democracy – a minor party in the former *Concertación*), announcing that it had stood down its presidential candidate to back the PS candidate, and consequently demanding the inclusion of the PPD in the pact so that the joint primary could proceed. Added to this requirement was agreement on joint lists for parliamentary elections. After tense hours which brought out the differences within the parties that make up the *Frente Amplio*, both this bloc and the Communist Party closed the door on the PS for trying to sneak their little brother in the window.

Finally, the right-wing registered its own primary, the CP and the FA did the same and the former *Concertación* failed to register legal primaries for the presidential elections. This does not mean that this sector cannot have its own candidacy, but it does mean that it will have to find a way to reach a consensus in the midst of feelings of betrayal and electoral debacle to achieve a single presidential candidacy, or else not agree on anything at all. and compete separately.

However, an unprecedented shift in political coordinates has taken place. We see a right of defined contours stagnant at 20% electorally and with little room to grow outside that margin; we see a new pact of left-wing parties that is occupying the place of the ghostly centre and, undeniably, the whole country knows that *something* has broken into the constituent power that is further to the left of these expressions.

## Transcendence of the electoral moment

On 20 May, in an editorial on *Bio Bio* – Chile's main radio station – its owner Tomás Mosciatti, known for his conservative positions, stated that: "The victory in the elections was not for the centre left, it was for the left... From now on, the left has never had so much power. This victory is superior to that of Salvador Allende because at that time Popular Unity did not intend to modify the Constitution, but rather accepted a reinforcement of it, called the Statute of Democratic Guarantees, in order to gain power. What has happened now is that the left has managed to have the popular mandate, that is, a legitimate mandate, to draft the Constitution without any limitation, because the only one it had, that of the 2/3 that required negotiation, does not exist".

The claim is debatable, but the significance of what is at stake is quite real. To think about the transformative magnitude that the current constituent moment opens up, it is necessary to link it both to the realization of various political and organizational challenges that the popular movement faces and to the possible results of the presidential and parliamentary elections.

From different benches, three bills have been presented to Congress that seek to enable the participation of independents in their own lists for the parliamentary elections, as with the constituent elections. It would be counterintuitive for the legislature to approve such a reform, but it is not a possibility to be ruled out. If this happens, it is most likely that the Congress that accompanies the work of the Constitutional Convention will have a composition similar to the latter. Failing that, the country could enter a period of unstable and tense duality between constituted power and constituent power.

The same thing would happen in terms of the presidency if one of the old coalitions prevails in winning executive power. However, if the PC-FA bloc prevails at the current constituent moment, the scenario could take an

unprecedented turn to the left. This is not about the radicalism of the bloc in question but starts, as during Popular Unity, from the popular expectations put into play and the self-organized initiatives these expectations unleash. It remains to be seen what will happen at this level in the coming months. Some scenarios - like the presidential one - are not only possible, but probable.

## Tasks to come

The people have won a victory. It has won it from below and from the left, heterogeneous like the revolt itself. The organized sectors have won it and the little organized also. No agreement from above could stop the will of a people that rose up, determined to overthrow so much injustice. It is the people that will now do what the post-dictatorial governments did not achieve in 30 years: to put an end to Pinochet's legacy and thereby open up a new way of organizing life in Chile. Unlike the constituent processes seen in Latin America during the so-called progressive cycle, here it has been done despite a government that declared war on it and despite a pandemic.

The people has its own history, not starting from scratch, but neither is it proposing a nostalgic return to a violently interrupted past. The central presence of feminism, socio-environmental struggles and plurinationality look forward, with a memory of the future that brings into play emancipatory political imaginations.

Although in these decades, peoples have risen up around the world to impede the advance of neoliberal reforms, the Chilean case has the peculiarity that its anti-neoliberal tone does not consist in stopping this advance, but in dismantling a neoliberalism that has been radically installed to the very end. There is nothing existing to protect or to leave intact. In this sense it is a novel experience.

Internally, some leftists view the diversity of popular representation in the constituent body with some suspicion. There are certain leftists who fear saying what they want or simply succumbing to their own impotence in relation to a popular movement which they were late to and have related to badly. Nothing is more dangerous for these leftists than this conservatism that leads to mistrust of the power of a people who have rightly decided to trust in their own strengths, leaving the field open for a broad encounter with anti-capitalist ideas.

The popular representations of the Convention have already undertaken the task of forming the bench of the peoples, first of all demanding minimum political conditions so that the constituent process can take place, namely unconditional liberation of all the political prisoners of the revolt, the demilitarization of the Wallmapu-Mapuche ancestral territory - and the creation of a truth and justice commission with a policy of comprehensive reparation for the victims of human rights violations, as well as the determination of the political and judicial liabilities of those responsible for these crimes..

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