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Chile

# Presidential elections, a first round full of surprises

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**The polls and the mainstream media said it loud and clear: the Chilean presidential elections would confirm the turn to the right in Latin America. The return to the presidency of the local Berlusconi, former president Sebastián Piñera, was assured, after a very disappointing second presidency of Michelle Bachelet.**

Caramba! Wrong again! In 2009, Sebastian Piñera obtained 3.6 million votes. On November 19, he got only 2.4 million (36.62 per cent). Even with the votes (8 per cent) of the Pinochetist José Antonio Kast, his victory is not necessarily assured on December 17th.

For the Socialist candidate, Alejandro Guillier, the result was not excellent: 22.67 per cent of the vote. In fact, Beatriz Sánchez - candidate of a new formation of the left, the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) – got a score of 20.27 per cent. And the Frente Amplio got 20 MPs and a senator (against 2 MPs in the previous Parliament).

To analyze this unforeseen situation, we publish this interview giving the analysis of Franck Gaudichaud, author of *Chili 1970-1973. Mille jours qui ébranlèrent le monde* (PUR, Rennes, 2013) and the collective work *Chili. Gouverner et résister dans une société néolibérale* (Harmattan, Paris, 2016), and member of the editorial board of *Contretemps*.

**Several polls said that the winner of the next elections to the presidency of Chile would be the former president Sebastián Piñera. Why was the return of the representative of an anti-social right possible?**

It is often said, paraphrasing Marx, that the dominant ideas in society are precisely those of the ruling classes. In the Chilean case, we must remember what the period of the dictatorship (1973-1989) meant: a radical counter-revolutionary transformation and the bloody establishment of neo-liberalism in this country, which has gone through the longest historical experience of it in the world. The right was finally able to spread its ideas to all levels of society, breaking the solidarities, the strength of the workers' movement and the social state of the time of Allende (1970-1973). The twenty years of the governments of the Concertation [1] only served to strengthen this process. Finally, the return of the right in 2010 - with the first presidential term of Piñera - confirmed the weight of the ideas and doxa of neo-liberalism in Chile.

**Why this return of an anti-social right after the second term of Michelle Bachelet?**

Piñera focused his whole campaign on the weak growth and the strong disillusionment with the record of the outgoing president. He had a discourse, which works for a part of the population, focused on business, economic development and individual success. Chilean society remains largely conservative, but this model is cracking more and more. The Chilean right is indeed reactionary, but let us remember that it is the entire political system inherited from the dictatorship that is, while on the macro-economic level, the centre-left of the former Concertation and the right conduct more or less the same (neo-liberal) policy. Finally, to the right of Piñera, we find an openly Pinochetist candidate, José Antonio Kast (who still won 8 per cent of the vote!), and we also find nostalgia for the dictatorship within the Piñera coalition, Piñera having started his rise in the shadow of the military and of his own brother, an important minister of Pinochet...

**What is the balance sheet of the mandate of Michelle Bachelet and the government of the "New Majority" (the parties of the Concertation - PS and PDC - plus the Communist Party)?**

The election of Michelle Bachelet's second government was the result of a campaign at a time when as sitting president she was still very popular and thanks to her taking up - in part - the demands of the 2011 social movements, particularly the student movement for free, public and quality education. These demands have been, so to speak, digested and "neo-liberalized". So Bachelet won the 2013 election by promising reforms in education, taxation and the Constitution.

We can now take stock of her term of office: Michelle Bachelet embodies a "transformisi" social-liberal progressivism. She has achieved a tax reform that is painless for big capital (mining in particular) and the richest people; as for educational reform, at present only 28 per cent of students have access to free higher education: in fact, it is essentially a state subsidy to private institutions; the objective was to reach 80 per cent of free education by 2020).

The draft reform of the Constitution was formulated through parodies of "citizen consultation", and must be approved by the Parliament and not by a Constituent Assembly. Remember that it is still the (amended) Constitution of the dictatorship that is in force... Not to mention the major mobilizations conducted in recent years against pension funds and for a reform in favour of a public and contribution-based system: there has been no progress on this theme, hence there is much disillusionment among Bachelet's own electoral base.

More generally, there is a crisis of legitimacy of the Chilean political "caste" and the "democratic" model installed since 1990, while levels of social repression remain high. This is also reflected in the abstention rate: this vote confirms that the biggest majority in Chile is abstention (54 per cent, which is considerable). It is very high among the popular classes, who do not feel represented, without this being expressed in an anti-system politicization; on the contrary, it is rather the opposite that is happening.

### **Is there a left alternative to the New Majority? Is there a credible political reorganization of the Chilean radical left?**

The (good) surprise of this first round were the results of the Frente Amplio, whose candidate, Beatriz Sánchez, got more than 20 per cent and was close behind the candidate supported by Bachelet, Alejandro Guillier, who won less than 23 per cent of the vote. Beatriz Sánchez almost qualified for the second round, whereas she was credited with only 8-10 per cent in the polls. So it's a slap in the face for the dominant media. We can see that the Frente Amplio managed to mobilize – not a minor achievement - in some big popular communes like Puente Alto and Maipu, in Santiago. It succeeded in fighting to win this electorate away from the right, which is strong in these neighbourhoods. It did this in a few months, since the Frente Amplio (FA) was formed in January. In the eyes of many hundreds of thousands of people, it has managed to embody a credible electoral alternative on the left.

Let us remember that the FA comes in part from sectors that led the student movement of 2011, including two young people who subsequently became MPs, Gabriel Boric and Giorgio Jackson: it regroups a broad and heterogeneous spectrum, ranging from the liberal centre to several organizations of the radical left, such as Igualdad (Equality) or Izquierda Libertaria (Libertarian Left). It is a global anti-neoliberal coalition, which represents a kind of Chilean equivalent of the Left Front in France or Podemos in Spain, with real difficulties in seriously implanting itself among the popular classes.

Moreover, several small collectives of the revolutionary left criticize the orientation of the FA, which they consider to be electoralist, and the composition of its leadership, which comes essentially from the middle classes. Beatriz Sanchez, a journalist who came late to politics, became the candidate after having defeated in primaries a candidate more clearly positioned on the left, the critical sociologist Alberto Mayol. But overall, the Frente Amplio has succeeded in becoming an alternative force on the national level. With this election, it also wins 20 MPs and one senator (out of 155 parliamentarians), more MPs than the Socialist Party (the party of Bachelet) and more than twice those of the Communist Party (which is part of the presidential majority). It's historic.

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The recomposition on the left will therefore accelerate. It remains to be seen whether this will be essentially an electoral surprise, resulting in an institutional integration of a new centre-left, which is what the ruling classes and traditional elites hope for, or whether the Frente Amplio will succeed in basing itself on the resistance "from below", or indeed become closer to the anti-capitalist sectors that do not belong to this coalition. However, there are major strategic contradictions within the FA, and the majority of elected MPs are from forces tempted by a "light" reformism, some of them being close to the PS and having even worked in ministries of the outgoing government. It is up to the rank and file of the FA and its left wing to conduct battles about the Front's orientation, and to do so now.

To win in the second round, Alejandro Guillier - candidate of the "New Majority" - absolutely needs the votes of Beatriz Sánchez. There is also the collapse of an essential part of the traditional political system - Christian Democracy - which will certainly reintegrate the "New Majority". The FA can now pressure Guillier to publicly commit to ending the pension fund system, transforming education, public control of natural resources and a genuine Constituent Assembly.

But this must be without entertaining any illusions about this candidate, who is really from the establishment, and especially without entering into negotiations between party machines concerning a possible governmental majority, at the risk of losing from the beginning any political capital acquired. Again, some leaders of the FA (especially Revolución Democrática) are unclear on their positioning. However, there are many FA activists who do not want to vote for Guillier and the heirs of the old Concertation (a slogan of "not one vote for Piñera" would in fact be largely sufficient from a tactical point of view)... One of the great absent factors is undoubtedly the mobilized workers, who have remained largely outside this election campaign, while the trade union movement is being revitalized little by little.

But this election and the unexpected emergence of the FA mark an inflection and an opening of the field of possibilities. We will have to follow what happens in the second round: whether Piñera is finally able to pull it off on December 17, placing himself in the wake of the current 'right turn' of South America or whether the recomposition in progress will allow Alejandro Guillier to govern from the centre-left. In any case we hope that there will be – whoever is the winner – a broadening of social struggles, because we still have a long road ahead of us to build real alternatives in Chile. And it is still and always the dignified resistance of the Mapuche people that can show the way, and also the many – still scattered – examples of eco-territorial, working-class and feminist resistance.

November 25, 2017

This interview was initially conducted by Stéfanie Prezioso for the Swiss journal *SolidaritéS*.

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[1] A coalition of Social Democracy and Christian Democracy, which governed from 1990 until 2010.