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Chile: the End of Neoliberalism and the Start of a New Chapter in Its History

The May 15th and 16th elections in Chile, which encompassed concurrently the vote for the 155 delegates to the Constituent Assembly as well as the vote for municipal officials and regional governors, has exposed the dismal failure of the government and rightwing parties while sanctioning the triumph of the independent candidates. Results also showed the preference in the election for more radical left-wing forces than those that conform the former coalition (Socialist Party, Christian Democrats, among others) that won elections and held the executive power for some terms since the restoration of democracy in 1990.

Self-absorbed in their bubble and disconnected from reality, the Chilean government and the political and economic elites were not able to envision the devastating defeat they suffered at the polls last week, in the election of the 155 delegates to the Constituent Assembly that will draft the new Constitution. The rightwing parties, congregated under the banner “Vamos por Chile” (Let’s go for Chile) did not even reach a third of the vote, the fraction that would have allowed them to overrule the content of the text. They hardly obtained 37 seats, representing 23% of the vote. The fact that the group accounted for 63% of the campaign expenditure was in this case of no help.

The political make-up of the 155 elected delegates to the Assembly implies the termination of the neoliberal model established under the dictatorship of General Pinochet and enshrined in the Constitution of 1980. Therefore, when the Constituent Assembly takes over, Chile will write a new Magna Carta, in which the subsidiary role of the state will be replaced by the estate’s leading role in helping reduce the inequalities that an imperfect market system worsened and was unable to alleviate.

The multiple reforms made to the Constitution since the return to democracy in 1990 were not adequate to respond to the aspirations -mainly about social justice- of big sectors of Chilean society. The first cracks in the model became apparent in 2005 with the so called “Penguin Revolution“ (Revolución de los pingüinos”), and then in 2011 with the demonstrations organized by college students. However, the explosion of social unrest that started in October 18 of 2019, in which 36 lives were lost, was what led to its final breakdown.

The persistence and severity of that conflict prompted the turn to the Constituent Assembly as the only way out to channel the social demands while preserving democracy. In the agreement reached in order to change the Constitution, after a popular referendum, some basic principles were established, such as the definition of a Democratic Republic, the standing of Court Judgments, the intangibility of International treaties, and a quorum of two thirds for the approval of their bills.

In the October 2020 plebiscite, almost 80% of Chileans voted not only in favor of drafting a new Constitution, but also for doing it by means of a Constituent Assembly, whose delegates were elected last week. The Assembly will launch on June 15 and will have a maximum of 12 months to draft a new Constitution, which will be then ratified through a Referendum in which voting will be compulsory.

Expectations are enormous. The Assembly will debate fundamental issues such as the political regime and system of government, decentralization, plurinational status, the functioning of government agencies such as the Constitutional Court, and economic development models. In this area, they would address an array of topics including the autonomy of the Central Bank, the end of privatization, the implementation of universal healthcare, the withdrawal of the health and education sectors from the sphere of market influence, and the end of the privately funded pension system (AFP), among others. Likewise, the Assembly will seek to rethink the production methods with the purpose of enhancing their aggregate value and moving away from an only extractivist economy, recovering the natural resources, and bringing water into public ownership.

Rodrigo Mundaca, elected governor of Valparaíso, points out that, at present, the Constitution’s legal system established to rule on water issues, allows for the privatization and commodification of water, thus violating the human right to this essential resource, which should have never been privatized. He cautions that the water market is in the hands of mining companies, real estate developers, and big agricultural enterprises, resulting in

the restriction of access to this resource for small farmers and large sectors of the population.

A PROJECT FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE CONSTITUTION

The Constituent Assembly tasked with writing the new Constitution will function under a gender parity arrangement which will warrant the equal participation of men and women. This way, Chile has become the first country in the world to lay the foundations for the creation of a Constitution with equal participation of men and women, opening an opportunity to tackle historically deferred issues such as equal pay, the distribution of burden in the care of minors, the elderly and the incapacitated, and equal access to power by women.

According to Marcela Rios, representative for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in Chile: “this is the first constitutional process that takes place after the advent of the world’s feminist movement (...) therefore, the agenda in this area will be central and innovative, and it may offer interesting results for Latin America and the world, in the sense that we will see what happens when women are seated alongside men on a level playing field, in order to write the new rules for a society.”

The equal participation of men and women occurred thanks to an electoral system that provides correction mechanisms to avoid the overrepresentation of one of the sexes. In this case, however, the correction to guarantee and equal representation favored men. It was women who had to give way to the quota, since they were the big winners in the polls. According to Ciper, a Chilean news site, if the gender parity adjustment would have not been applied, women would have become delegates at a higher rate than men: 84 vs. 71 respectively.

Roberto Isikson, director of Cadem, a marketing and public opinion firm in Chile, explains the phenomenon this way: “the gender parity mechanism not only created the need to have an equal Assembly but, in addition, it encouraged voters to choose women above men and, in many districts, it was women who had to give up their quota to men.

On the other hand, In the election for Assembly delegates, a mechanism was established by which 17 seats were reserved for representatives of indigenous peoples, an essential action that will contribute to the integration of the indigenous community of Latin America.

In Chile, the Constituent Assembly will include the ten indigenous groups recognized by the State. The Mapuche will be the people with the higher representation, with 7 seats. The

Aimara will have 2 seats, and other groups, such as the Rapa Nui, Quechua, Diaguita and Yagán, among others, will be represented by 1 delegate.

THE REJECTION OF TRADITIONAL PARTIES AND THE VICTORY OF INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES

Not only the rightwing parties congregated under “Vamos por Chile” suffered a defeat. The Center left performed even worse (ex-Concertación and others,) grouped under the banner “Apruebo” (I approve) obtained only 25 seats (16% of the vote). This coalition was surpassed by “Apruebo con dignidad” (I approve with dignity), comprised by the Communist party, the “Frente Amplio” (Broad Front), a group of parties that came into existence after the College students’ protests in 2011, and other smaller groups. The coalition gained 28 seats (18%) and it represents the first opposition force in the Constituent Assembly.

The meager results attained by “Vamos por Chile” and “Apruebo”, which represent the parties that ruled Chile since 1990, was counteracted by the success of the independent candidates, who took 48 seats (31%). If, to the 48 seats secured by candidates without political affiliation, we add the 40 seats of delegates that run with quotas granted by political parties, mainly from the left, independent delegates account for 56.8% of the Assembly that will draft the new Constitution.

For historian Gabriel Salazar, the significant participation of independent candidates represents a “historical earthquake,” even without seeing the results. In this elections, he states, two conflicts came together: on the one hand, between the government and the opposition, what he calls “the conventional conflict”. And, in the other, the conflict between citizenry or popular sovereignty, and the written Law and the political class articulated around that Law. Independent delegates represent the popular sovereignty and they are expressing their rejection of the current political system and of the traditional elites. According to a poll from the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), on April 2021, only 2% of citizens trusted the political parties.

Rightwing parties were not only defeated in the election for the Constituent Assembly, but also in the regional governments’ election of mayors and councilors -conducted for the first time. They lost more than fifty of the 345 municipalities and the number of councillors also decreased. They did not win any of the 16 regional governments in the first round either. In the Santiago metropolitan region, populated by 7 of the 18 million inhabitants of the country, their candidate, Catalina Parot ended up in third place. The

position will be disputed between Claudio Orrego, from the Christian Democrats (25% of the vote) and Karina Oliva, from Frente Amplio (22.6%).

Of the 16 regional governments, only two had a clear definition in the first round, and both went to the hands of independent candidates: Rodrigo Mundaca, from Frente Amplio, swept to power in Valparaíso, and Jorge Flies Añon, in Magallanes. The remaining regional governments will be defined during the second round on June 13. Rightwing parties do not play an important role in this dispute.

On the contrary, the Communist Party and Frente Amplio achieved victories in important municipalities such as Maipú, Viña del mar, Ñuñoa and Santiago, won by Irací Hassler of the Communist party. Never before had communists hold power in this municipality, not even during the government of Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular (1970 – 1973), of which they were part.

The Center left was also beaten by the Communist Party and Frente Amplio in both, the Constituent Assembly and the regional governments and municipalities. Against this backdrop, Hernando Muñoz, one of the presidential candidates from this coalition, declared that the ex-Concertación had died and had been buried a long time ago, which became evident in this election.

In addition, Sebastián Piñera acknowledged that the Chilean people “have given the government and the traditional political forces a clear message: we have not been in tune with the demands and aspirations of the people, and we are being challenged by new expressions and styles of leadership.” Along the same line, he said that it should be the duty of the Executive “to pay attention and humbly listen to the message people are sending, and to strive to do whatever it is necessary to better interpret and respond to the needs, aspirations and hopes of all Chileans.”

Empty words. The next day, his political coalition voted against the proposed “Tax on the Super Rich,” which aimed to apply a one-time tax at a rate of 2.5% on wealthy states that exceed 22 million dollars. It also rejected an additional tax increase of 3% on big businesses. An estimate indicated that the resources resulting from that taxation would go to financing, in part, an Emergency Universal Assistance Fund, that would allow the poorest families in the country to meet the sanitary and mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

A WARNING SIGN FOR COLOMBIA AND PERU

Predictably, the events in Chile will be the mirror in which many governments of the region will contemplate themselves. In particular, those of Colombia and Peru that for

years saw Chile's model as the oasis and the example to be followed. The drafting of a new Constitution by means of a Constituent Assembly, with parity between women and men, with 17 seats reserved for indigenous peoples, and with an agenda that seeks social justice through replacing the subsidiary role of the state for a larger, leading role, will be a signal that cannot be missed.

Holding the record as the second economy with the largest inequality in the region –and a level of poverty of 42%- Colombia bleeds with the unending social unrest that exploded on April 28 and has already left more than 50 deaths, and hundreds of wounded and detailed; with no hope in sight for an agreement with the government of Iván Duque. A year before presidential elections, Gustavo Petro, pre-candidate from the leftist group Colombia Humana, has a very good chance to succeed.

In Peru, the dissatisfaction with the neoliberal model became tangible on April 11, with the unexpected victory, in the first round of the presidential elections, of the teacher Pedro Castillo, candidate for Perú Libre, from the more radical left. His opponent for the second round, Keiko Fujimori –supported by the media and economic powers- was not able to surpass him. The economic model and changes to the Constitution are central themes of the presidential debate that will be defined on June 6.

In Chile, just six months before the presidential and congressional election, and only two months before the Primaries, last week's electoral results outline the political leaning of the next government. According to the new CEP's poll, President Piñera counts with a popular approval rate of only 9%, the lowest during his second term. On the contrary, the results of the recent election have boosted the presidential candidacies of Daniel Jadue, from the Communist Party, and of Gabriel Boric, of Frente Amplio, who will face each other on a Primary election on July 18. Aside from the elections' results in these countries, it seems as if the neoliberal model does not have anything else to offer. One thing that is for sure is that Chile has turned the page and that it will start to write the next chapter of its history

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