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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Vijay Prashad and Taroa Zúñiga Silva / Globetrotter
18.12.2021

Chile Is at the Political Crossroads: Social Renewal or Decades of Painful Neoliberal Policy

“If [Augusto] Pinochet were alive, he would vote for me,” [said](#) José Antonio Kast in 2017, during the Chilean presidential election when he ran as an independent candidate. This was an especially provocative statement made by him out of the many he has made over the years—he had also [said](#) that “Chileans need God,” during his campaign in 2017, while proposing religious teachers in all public schools in Chile.

Kast, who is now a member of Chile’s right-wing Republican Party, is in the running in the 2021 presidential election in Chile as a candidate for the party. The first round of voting for the election [took place](#) on November 21.

Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006), to whom Kast was referring in his 2017 statement, was a military dictator in Chile from 1973 to 1990. A few days after Pinochet led the U.S.-backed coup on September 11, 1973, that overthrew the popularly elected government of President Salvador Allende, he [said](#), “From time to time, democracy must bathe in blood, so that it can remain a democracy.” Kast, who came fourth in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, supported the eventual winner and now-outgoing President Sebastián Piñera, who is a billionaire. This year, Kast has [won](#) the most votes in the first round of the presidential election and sits just behind the left candidate Gabriel Boric in [opinion polls](#) for the second round of voting, which is expected to take place on December 19. This year, Kast did not assert that Pinochet would vote for him. He knows that he would.

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The

Heir

to

Pinochet

Kast's [parents](#) fled Germany in the aftermath of World War II because Kast's father—Michael Kast Schindele—was a [member](#) of the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler. They arrived in Chile in 1950, where they built a family business and raised nine children (Kast was born in 1966). The Kast family has a deep history of being involved with the far-right. José's brother Miguel Kast was [one](#) of the many “young economists trained by Milton Friedman” (known as the “[Chicago Boys](#)”) who launched a “neoliberal experiment” in Chile [under](#) Pinochet “that saw social spending slashed and wealth funneled upward to the very rich,” according to the Intercept. Pinochet might be a dictator for many in Chile, but for the Kast family, he was a heroic leader, which is why it is with no sense of embarrassment that José Antonio Kast said that the dead dictator would vote for him.

In fact, the 30 years of Pinochet's dictatorship are not looked upon with a sense of shame or embarrassment by a large section of the Chilean population. When Pinochet was removed from power in 1990, a series of cases appeared in Chilean courts to bring Pinochet and others to justice for various human rights violations carried out under his regime, including [kidnapping and murders](#). None of the more than 300 [cases](#) that implicated Pinochet directly, which were filed by his death—including the assassination of Carlos Prats, a former Chilean Army commander who was an “[outspoken](#) opponent” of Pinochet, and other assassinations [carried out](#) under Operation Condor—came to any conclusive end. In July 2002, meanwhile, the Chilean Supreme Court closed the prosecution of Pinochet in the cases involving the “[Caravan of Death](#)”—which was “an elite death squad” that executed “dozens of former mayors, police chiefs, labor leaders and other local officials” in Chile—stating that Pinochet was “mentally unfit due to dementia.” Using universal jurisdiction, the Spanish Supreme Court prosecutor Carlos Castresana tried to open a [separate](#) road within the Spanish judicial system in July 1996, leading to Pinochet's arrest in London in 1998. But the “Pinochet case” was [scuttled](#) when the then heads of government of Britain (Tony Blair), Chile (Eduardo Frei), and Spain (José María Aznar) colluded to shield Pinochet by sending him home to Santiago. The impunity for Pinochet marked Chilean politics for years to come, since it meant that no one needed to be embarrassed to claim his lineage despite the atrocities he was accused of.

Kast denies that Pinochet was a dictator. He pointed to the Constitution of 1980 and [said](#) that this document “contained the entire transition to democracy.” Between 1973 and 1980, before the constitution was introduced, Chile was not a dictatorship, Kast argued, because the government of Pinochet willingly produced a “democratic” constitution (which remains in force today, and is being [rewritten](#) by a Constitutional Convention that will close its work after the new president has been elected). Kast, without embarrassment, claims that Pinochet—who personified every attribute of the late 20th century’s dictators—is ironically a guardian of Chilean democracy.

Contempt for Human Rights

Kast has demonstrated a contempt for human rights. During a presidential debate in October 2021, Kast [proposed](#) the closure of the human rights institution in Chile, the [National Institute of Human Rights](#) (INDH), saying: “We have suggested that there has to be a reformulation, and to make a reformulation... [of the INDH. W]e believe that the current one (INDH) [has to be closed] because it is clearly not fulfilling its aims.” The reason Kast made these comments is that the INDH, which recently [investigated](#) the human rights violations by the Chilean police against the anti-government demonstrators—who have been protesting for more than two years now—concluded that there had been “a breach of the protection of human rights” during these protests. “The Carabineros [Chilean Police],” Kast [said](#) during the presidential debate, “is a great institution that does not violate human rights.” Chile has been witnessing a massive political upsurge that began in 2019 and has remained in place up until now as part of a broad dissatisfaction with the plummeting economic conditions and with police violence that has come in response to the peaceful protests. As a consequence of the kind of political discourse Kast has been indulging in and the propaganda being spread by the hard-right, [surveys](#) now show that more people in Chile trust the police more than the INDH.

Total alignment with the police and the army defines Kast’s politics. That is why he pledged to [remove](#) Chile from the UN Human Rights Council, which has since 2019 published [reports](#) that have criticized the Chilean police for violating basic human rights protocols in their handling of the “mass protests” in Chile. Kast’s contempt for the UN Human Rights Council reflects his general position on such international cooperation. In

February 2021, while tweeting about withdrawing from the council, he [said](#), “While the UN attacks Chile with various policies and false accusations, the [UN] Human Rights Council has as members Venezuela and Cuba, the bloodiest dictatorships in Latin America.” Hatred for the socialist project in Venezuela is amplified in Kast’s hatred for the Venezuelan migrants who have had to leave their country as a [consequence](#) of the sanctions imposed by the United States. Kast [proposed](#) the construction of a ditch on the Chilean border with Bolivia to prevent migrants—mostly Venezuelans—from crossing into Chile.

Trump of the Southern Cone

Many comparisons have been made between Kast and other far-right leaders: he has been [called](#) the Bolsonaro of Chile, drawing similarities between him and Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, and he also has been referred to as Chile’s Donald Trump. Kast has ambitions to form an “[anti-globalist](#)” bloc with Bolsonaro and former U.S. President Trump as well as Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (he made these comments on a [show](#) where he put on a red “Make America Great Again” hat worn by Trump supporters). In late November, Kast traveled to Washington, D.C., to [meet](#) with U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Issa Kort (the former Chilean representative to the Organization of American States), as well as María Paulina Uribe (marketing manager at PepsiCo) and Joel Velasco (vice president at UnitedHealth Group). Kast is close to the far-right Spanish party, Vox, and its leader [Santiago Abascal](#); Kast has also joined Abascal in the formation of a new far-right group across Latin America called the [Madrid Charter](#).

Like Abascal, Bolsonaro, and Trump, Kast is in favor of small government when it comes to the regulation of big business and of large government when it comes to law and order and family values. Kast’s deep misogyny comes out in his promise to [abolish](#) the [Ministry of Women and Gender Equality](#) in Chile and to [roll back](#) the modest provisions for [abortion](#), which is [partially](#) allowed in Chile (he eventually had to [rescind](#) both promises due to the growing social consensus for women’s rights in the country). “I do not feel right-wing,” [said](#) Kast in May 2018 in order to appeal to the center, although his program is entirely in accord with the far-right.

Chile faces a real choice in this presidential election: between the far-right’s Kast and the

left's Boric. Boric [says](#) that he will reverse Chile's habits of neoliberalism. But the election might not be a choice between the far-right and the left as much as it might be an election about the failure of Chile to prosecute those who violated the rights of Chileans during the 30 years of Pinochet's rule.

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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