

CHILE - Winning Candidates Back on the Campaign Trail (Gustavo González, IPS)

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SANTIAGO, Dec 12 (IPS) - Michelle Bachelet and Sebastián Piñera, the candidates who captured the most votes in Sunday's presidential elections in Chile, immediately launched their campaigns for the Jan. 15 runoff, in which both will strive to capture votes from the centre, lower-income sectors, and women.

Bachelet, the candidate of the centre-left coalition that has governed Chile since the end of the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, won the first round of voting with 45.85 percent of the ballots, according to the final tally announced at 13.30 GMT Monday, based on 99.82 percent of the vote.

But since Bachelet, a 54-year-old pediatrician who belongs to President Ricardo Lagos' Socialist Party, failed to win 50 percent of the ballots plus one vote, she will have to face off in the second round with Piñera, 52, a wealthy right-wing economist who garnered 25.41 percent.

Another rightist candidate, Joaquín Lavín, took 23.22 percent of the vote, while Tomás Hirsch of the Humanist Party, who represented an alliance with the Communist Party - neither of which is represented in Congress - took 5.4 percent.

"He who came in second cannot pretend he came in first," said Bachelet at around midnight Sunday, addressing her cheering supporters outside of a hotel in downtown Santiago. She was alluding to Piñera, who was celebrating together with Lavín six blocks away.

Piñera and Lavín underscored the fact that together they won 48.63 percent of the vote - the first time that the right has captured more votes than the governing Concertación for Democracy coalition in the four presidential elections held since Dec. 11, 1989, after Pinochet was defeated in an October 1988 referendum on his rule.

But the ruling coalition is fairly confident that the votes taken by Hirsch will go to Bachelet in the runoff, giving her more than 50 percent of the vote, which means she would be sworn in as Lagos' successor on Mar. 11, 2006.

Also playing in favour of the ruling coalition is the fact that it captured 51.77 percent of the votes in the federal legislative elections held Sunday as well, while the Alliance for Chile took only 38.7 percent.

The Alliance is an electoral pact formed by Piñera's National Renovation Party (PRN) and Lavín's Independent Democratic Union (UDI), while the ruling coalition is made up of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the Socialist Party (PS), the Party for Democracy (PPD) and the Radical Social Democratic Party (PRSD).

In honing their strategies for the upcoming runoff, the Bachelet and Piñera camps will need to consider the obvious loss of influence wielded by political parties over the way voters cast their ballots, since the legislative election results were not mirrored by those of the first round of voting for president.

For Bachelet, the main challenge will be to earn the backing of the left-wing forces outside the ruling coalition, by appealing to their shared opposition to the right. But Hirsch already announced on Sunday night that he personally plans to cast a blank ballot on Jan. 15, because of his rejection of the "neoliberal system" represented by all three of his rivals in the first round of voting, including Bachelet.

UDI legislator Patricio Melero admitted to IPS that the main obstacle now facing Piñera lies precisely in what those who voted for Hirsch in the first round decide to do in the second round, recalling that in January 2000, the Communist vote played a decisive role in helping Lagos defeat Lavín in the runoff.

Another crucial task for Bachelet will be to woo back the voters from the centre of the political spectrum who traditionally vote for the Christian Democratic Party, which forms part of the ruling coalition, but chose this time to back Piñera, who repeatedly stressed throughout his campaign that he is a "Christian humanist" and that his father was a Christian Democrat.

Piñera, as the candidate for the PRN, gave the Chilean right the opportunity to distance itself once and for all from the Pinochet dictatorship. The former dictator himself, now 90, is currently under house arrest, facing charges of human rights violations and illicit enrichment, and did not vote on Sunday.

But the multimillionaire Piñera, whose business empire includes LAN Chile airlines and the Chilevisión TV network, will now need to win over the lower-income sectors who supported conservative but populist UDI leader Lavín in the first round.

According to some analysts, a large part of the votes from lower-income brackets that went to Lavín on Sunday could now shift to Bachelet, who has pledged to tackle the social inequities that make Chile one of the countries with the most unequal distribution of wealth in Latin America, second only to Brazil.

"The Chilean populace does not want to be governed by someone from the right. Democratically, they do not want this. So it is highly unlikely that the president of Chile will be someone from the right, like Piñera," Jorge Burgos, a PDC legislator re-elected on Sunday, commented to IPS.

PPD lawmaker María Antonieta Saa, also re-elected, told IPS, "The enormous backing she got in the first round is Michelle Bachelet's greatest strength. So is the fact that she is from the Concertación, and thirdly, she is the first woman who could reach the presidency of Chile."

For her part, Bachelet declared that "We will work even harder (in the runoff campaign) because it seems that we women are always obliged to work twice as hard. We are going to win the second run, because there is no turning back now, and I am going to be the president of Chile."

Winning over female voters is in fact one of the most daunting challenges now facing Piñera, whose support in Sunday's elections was primarily male. Women make up 52 percent of voters in Chile, and more women voted for Lavín than for Piñera in the first round, although Bachelet took the majority of female votes overall.

The governing coalition candidate is now preparing to bring new faces into her campaign, including high-profile members of the PDC like former foreign minister Soledad Alvear, who was elected senator on Sunday by a large margin, and former president Eduardo Frei, who was also elected to the Senate.

PRN Deputy Carlos Vilches told IPS that Piñera's main strength lies in the fact that "he signifies a substantive change from the three Concertación governments, which have shown over the years that they have had problems in terms of honesty and corruption."

In Chile, voter registration is voluntary but voting is obligatory for those who are registered. Lagos attempted to push through a reform to make registration automatic and voting voluntary, but he failed to win the necessary support in Congress.

Including the one million registered voters who failed to turn out on Sunday and those who are not registered, a total of 3.4 million adults in Chile - a country of 15.6 million - did not vote on Sunday.

Former Chilean interior minister José Miguel Insulza, who is now secretary-general of the Organisation of American States (OAS), commented to IPS that in a country where 100 percent of the population has identity cards, there is no justification for having a system in which registration in the electoral system is

not automatic and voting is not voluntary.

Meanwhile, the ruling coalition will have a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time since the dictatorship came to an end. In the 120-member Chamber of Deputies, the Concertación won 65 seats, up from 63, while the share held by the Alliance for Chile dropped from 57 to 54. And in the 38-member Senate, the Concertación held onto its 20 seats.

Constitutional reforms approved last September eliminated the nine posts of designated senators, four of whom represented the armed forces - a legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship.

The ruling coalition's new majority in Congress will now pave the way for pushing through planned reforms of the social security, health and educational systems, all of which were totally or partially privatised during the de facto military regime.

On Sunday night, Bachelet promised to carry out "the biggest revolution in the educational system in the history of Chile."

With additional reporting by Alejandro Kirk

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