

Chile's New President, General Pinochet and the Political Right

By

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After a hard-fought electoral battle, Chile has a new president. On Sunday, Ricardo Lagos, the socialist leader, defeated his conservative challenger Joaquin Lavin, by 190,000 votes, the smallest margin of any presidential election since Chile's return to democracy.

During the five weeks leading to the second-round vote, Mr. Lagos ran an extraordinarily effective campaign. Stunned by Mr. Lavin's success in the first round, Mr. Lagos was forced to rethink his strategy. His characteristically intellectual rhetoric was replaced by simple and direct appeals to the electorate, and by surrounding himself by a group of young technocrats, he injected a badly needed sense of modernity into the campaign. The new members of his team were quick to distance themselves from some of the most controversial and confrontational elements of the program, including proposed legislation that would greatly increase the power of labor unions, hurting Chile's ability to compete internationally and reducing its economic growth potential.

What is surprising about the electoral result is not that Mr. Lagos won – after all he was the favorite all along --, but that Mr. Lavin was able to mount such an effective challenge. For the first time since the 1930s, Chile's right emerged as a serious political option. Mr. Lavin obtained a remarkable 48.7% of the vote by campaigning as an efficient, issue-oriented politician that was not influenced by ideology or petty political quarrels of the past. Gradually his campaign captured the imagination of an increasing number of Chileans. He was particularly effective among women and the young.

If Chile's rightist political parties want to capitalize on Mr. Lavin's popularity, they must show that they have moved away from their bedrock conservative ideology and have become pragmatic, modern, and issue oriented. If the right fails to convince voters that it has, in fact, moved in this direction, it is likely to go back to its traditional 30% of the vote. If, on the other hand, it demonstrates that it has embraced the new type of politics espoused by Mr. Lavin, it could make considerable gains in upcoming municipal and congressional elections. It may even gain the presidency in 2006.

A first key test on whether Chile's right has really changed may come as soon as next week. During the campaign Mr. Lavin repeatedly said that, irrespective of his age and health, General Pinochet should stand trial in Chile for alleged violations of human rights. If, as many fear, the U.K. releases the General in the next few days, Chile's right-of-center politicians should insist, publicly and forcefully, that Pinochet is brought to justice in his own country. The right should in fact go further, demanding that the General gives up his senator-for-life post and the immunity that goes with it. This would

not only remove Pinochet from Chile's political life, but would also permit the courts to greatly expedite the trial against him. This would allow Chile to address its traumatic past.

What made Mr. Lavin an unusual right-of-center candidate was that he proposed many initiatives that would modernize Chile's political and social institutions. He suggested, among other things, that designated-senators, an anti-democratic legacy of the military regime, should be abolished, and that Chile's obligatory military draft should come to an end. Many doubted his sincerity – and that of the political parties that supported him --, and branded the proposals as marketing gimmicks. Chile's right can show that the skeptics were wrong, by supporting – better yet, by introducing – legislation along these lines in the next few months. Mr. Lavin himself should take the initiative, and work out with Mr. Lagos a series of legislative initiatives – including some that require a constitutional reform --, on which both candidates agreed during the campaign and that would enhance Chile's democratic system.

Mr. Lagos, in turn, should avoid the nostalgic and tired views that dominated the first part of his campaign and pursue, with vigor, the type of modernizing economic reforms that his new and young inner circle support. If this happens, Chile will enter into the 21st century with great prospects. It could indeed become an exemplary country, where justice, democracy and economic opportunity flourish.

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