

THE PEOPLE ARE HERE TO STAY

Pierina Ferretti

Jacobin América Latina, Jan 4, 2022

(translated from Spanish original by DeepL Translate)

In Chile, a country battered by decades of neoliberalism, a new people is emerging today, claiming the right to build their destiny with justice and dignity. These people are here to stay as the protagonists of their own history. That is the good news this election has for us.

A triumph celebrated in Chile and in the world

The night of Sunday, December 19, before hundreds of thousands of people overflowing the main thoroughfare of Santiago with a whole country following the news on radio and television, Gabriel Boric, the young man who ten years ago who led the student mobilizations for free public education, delivered his victory speech as president-elect.

That night, a massive people's celebration spread throughout Chile. And it was not for nothing. Boric became the youngest president elected in the history of the republic winning by a margin unsurpassed by any previously elected president. Moreover, and most significantly, Boric is the first representative of a left-wing coalition to win the presidential elections since Salvador Allende in September 1970. After the shock of seeing the far-right José Antonio Kast coming close to a chance of reaching the presidential palace, the resounding support achieved by the Apruebo Dignidad candidate in the runoff was felt as a breath of fresh air after weeks of tension.

But the celebrations went beyond national borders. Gabriel Boric's election was hailed by leftists and progressives around the world as a victory against the conservative backlash that is multiplying throughout the George. At a time when the resolution of the capitalist crisis is debated between projects of democratic recovery and the reconstruction of social rights as opposed to ultra-conservative alternatives that try to rebuke the population, attacking above all the movements leading liberation struggles, Boric's victory -and that of any representative of democratic forces over reactionary forces - therefore acquires strategic relevance globally.

In Latin America, moreover, the triumph of the Chilean left reinforces the hope for the rebirth of a new progressive cycle after the debacle of the previous "pink tide". Boric's election, added to those of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico (2018), Alberto Fernández in Argentina (2019), Luis Arce in Bolivia (2020), Pedro Castillo in Peru (2021) and Xiomara Castro in Honduras (2021), and to the possible victories of Gustavo Petro in Colombia and Lula da Silva in Brazil next year, promises (considering the limits of each case) a possible recomposition of continental progressivism.

Boric's appearance on the Latin American political scene will help to strengthen the commitment of the left to democracy, liberties and human rights, concerns that the new president, heir to the

deep-rooted tradition of Chilean democratic socialism, has been emphatic in emphasizing. In this regard, it must be remembered that Boric, unlike other leaders of the Chilean and regional left, has not hesitated to openly criticize the authoritarian drifts of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela or to support the mobilizations that took place in 2021 in Cuba, despite the discomfort that his proposals have caused in sectors that are reluctant to criticize these experiences.

The "2011 generation" reaches the presidential palace

At the local level, Gabriel Boric's victory is an expression of the maturation of forces that were born in the heat of one of the most relevant anti-neoliberal struggles of this period. The president-elect, as part of a group of young political leaders (among whom Giorgio Jackson and the communist militants Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola stand out), was forged in the midst of the student revolt of 2011, the first mobilization with an openly anti-neoliberal content that escalated nationally and managed to crack the legitimacy of the right wing regime. At that time, the demand for the right to free public education, together with the criticism of for-profit educational companies, became an explicit challenge to the core of neoliberalism which represents the commodification of central aspects of social reproduction to benefit corporate profit, all of which is subsidized by the State.

At the same time, the political elites that had administered the model for decades were wearing out and a new generation was beginning to emerge. The "2011 generation", as it has been called since then, was formed in opposition not only to the right, but also to the center-left Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia, a coalition that led the country for thirty years after Pinochet's dictatorship and which continued and deepened neoliberal policies, renouncing the basic elements of any self-respecting social democratic program.

The student collectives that led the mobilizations of that period were articulated in movements and groupings that, with the passing of the years and going through numerous difficulties, breakups and rearrangements, resulted in the creation of new parties and the creation of Frente Amplio as a coalition. These groups, in alliance with the Communist Party, which represents the historical left, are the basis of what is known as Apruebo Dignidad, a pact that supported Boric's candidacy and managed to become an independent political alternative to the center-left Concertación and thereby displace the traditional parties in the leadership of the State.

The keys to victory

Gabriel Boric won with 55.9% of the votes, surpassing his opponent by almost one million votes. A resounding victory preceded by the alarming rise of the ultra-right-wing José Antonio Kast, who achieved unexpected growth and emerged as the leading coalition in the first round of voting. This was accompanied by the stagnation of Boric who as the candidate of Apruebo Dignidad after months of

campaigning and leading the polls obtained almost the same number of votes that his coalition had managed to mobilize in the primaries held in July.

These results hit the left hard including the social movements and the whole spectrum of democratic forces. It seemed impossible that after the popular revolt of 2019, the massive feminist upsurge, and the process underway to write a new Constitution, José Kast the extreme right candidate could become president of the republic.

The seriousness of the danger produced an intense mobilization in the four weeks that followed. Within days the democratic forces of the country rallied behind Boric's candidacy. The parties of the former Concertación and some of its most representative leaders, such as former presidents Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, expressed their support.

At the same time, from the other end of the spectrum, key figures from the autonomous neighborhood organizations which emerged during the 2019 Uprising, and who had always been reluctant to support established political parties, called on the popular sectors to vote for Boric. A key milestone in this sense was the support given by Senator-elect Fabiola Campillai and young Gustavo Gatica, widely respected in the country for the integrity of their struggle for justice and reparations after being blinded by deliberate police assaults.

In the same vein, Boric received the support of important leaders of the Indigenous movement, such as Machi Francisca Linconao, a recognized Mapuche spiritual authority and currently a member of the Constitutional Convention, and Elisa Loncón, Mapuche leader and president of the Constitutional Convention. The vast majority of social movements, trade unions, and other grassroots civic organizations joined in their support. Within these movements, the key role of feminist organizations should be highlighted. They convened early and quickly deployed their members in support.

It should be emphasized that the most impressive and crucial aspect of the final weeks was the autonomous and independent activation of countless self-organized groups of the most diverse compositions: from artists to animal activists, from LGBTIQ+ collectives to progressive Christians, neighborhood associations, cultural centers, soccer fans. A seemingly endless list of groups self-organized to campaign. Bicycle rallies, concerts, poetry recitals, leafleting and door-to-door campaigns multiplied all over the country, overtaking the actions planned by the official candidate's campaign.

This enormous social mobilization showed an engaged population, committed to the defense of progress achieved to date and pushing to make their voices heard. This resolute and autonomous deployment during the second round shows these groups are

here to stay. And here lies one of the greatest strengths of Chilean society today. The left, or at least a part of it, is aware that without the active support of society it is practically impossible to advance the program of reforms proposed to the country. It knows that it must summon the people who came out to play a leading role in the political process. Such a relationship between politics and society, which Apruebo Dignidad is today called to affirm, is the antithesis of the grassroots demobilization strategy of the center-left Concertación after it took State leadership in 1990.

In terms of electoral results, the effectiveness of social mobilization leaves no doubt. Gabriel Boric's victory was made possible by a significant increase in electoral participation in the second round. This included the votes of women under 50 years of age and votes from the working class neighborhoods of the capital. In the second round, Boric's support went to 55.6% from 43%, an increase of 1.2 million new voters in four weeks.

After winning 1.8 million votes in the first round Boric's final vote total reached 4.6 million. This figure is higher than the sum of all the center-left and left candidates who, after falling by the wayside, supported him in the second round.

Likewise, the available information clearly shows that the most significant increases in electoral participation were from women and from the working class areas of the capital. 68% of women under 30 years and 56% of those between 30 and 50 voted for Gabriel Boric. In the working class neighborhoods of Santiago he obtained support above 70% in some cases.

The reasons for the increase in participation in these segments vary, but it is possible to outline some hypotheses. In the case of the overwhelming support of women, the political effect of the contemporary feminist upsurge is evident. The women of Chile, aware of their hard-won rights and willing to fight for those that are missing, such as free abortion, mobilized to halt a reactionary conservative victory.

On the other hand, the broad support for Boric's candidacy in the working class neighborhoods shows the massive politicization produced by the October 2019 Uprising. The popular neighborhoods of the capital were protagonists in the revolt and directly suffered the brutal police repression. The vast majority of injured and dead come from the popular neighborhoods of the Santiago Metropolitan region. Therefore, it is not wrong to suggest that the politicizing experience of the revolt and the memory of the repression acted as a buffer against the discourse of the extreme right, which failed, on this occasion, to attract the support of these sectors.

The 'lefts' overflow!

With Boric's triumph, the Chilean left has taken a fundamental step in its consolidation as a political alternative, displacing the duopoly of the center-left Concertación and the center-to-far Right for the leadership of the State. About this there is no doubt. However, in the ten years since the student mobilizations in which the Boric generation was forged, new struggles, new actors and new forces have been emerging in Chilean society displaying high levels of autonomy in relation to existing politics, which includes the left articulation of Apruebo Dignidad.

Among these emerging forces, the most powerful has been the feminist movement. Since the 2018 student protests against sexual harassment in universities, Chilean feminism has grown its own mobilizing capacity but also - and this is central - it has affirmed actions of rebellion and struggle by broad sectors of society that go beyond women and the gender non-conforming. Feminism as an organized movement and as a cultural force has been one of the determining factors of this cycle of struggles, far exceeding the constituted left, since a considerable part of feminism exists outside the institutional left. (This does not prevent feminist expression at all political levels, as has been seen within the Constitutional Convention and, above all, as was shown in the second round campaign, in which the feminist movement unhesitatingly supported the candidate of the left and where significant acts of unity were carried out).

Socio-environmental organizations have also been gaining ground at the local and national level while maintaining autonomy from the institutional left. The weight of the environmental movement within society was evident during the election of Constitutional Constituents, in which a large number of territorial leaders linked to the struggles against extractivism and the protection of territories were elected to the Convention. This was also shown in the election of Rodrigo Mundaca, leader of the struggle for the human right to water, as governor of Valparaíso region. This movement of differing organizations in varying sizes, has managed to take root in the far reaches of the country and constitutes a force largely independent of the institutional left, although links and alliances exist.

Finally, since the 2019 Uprising, fringes of people have begun to organize not only outside the political left, but also outside the more consolidated social movements. The Uprising produced countless collective experiences, neighborhood assemblies and territorial councils, and the Constitutional Constituency process found sectors of the popular camp willing to give the divergence an autonomous form in the raising of their own candidates in opposition to existing political parties, including those of the left. The best expression of that was the People's List, which had a tremendous electoral success in the Constituent Assembly but failed in the objective of presenting

a candidate for the presidential election and broke up end up soon after. Another experience in the search for political autonomy and self-representation was the senatorial candidacy of Fabiola Campillai, who won a landslide victory and became the senator winning the most votes in the country.

Social forces in Chile have become more complex. The groups forming Apruebo Dignidad represent the most established left formation politically. Nevertheless, they do not exert hegemony over the full range of participants in Chilean grassroots activism. Therefore, as the new governing coalition Apruebo Dignidad will have to find ways to link, communicate, and coordinating with the emerging sectors without seeking to subordinate them.

Manage or transform

"It will not be easy, it will not be fast, but our commitment is to move forward", said Gabriel Boric towards the end of his first speech as president elect, aware of the difficulties he will face to implement his government program. In addition to the economic and social consequences of the pandemic and the expected backlash of the established economic powers who see their interests threatened, the current Congress is one in which the left does not have a majority. Thus, it will be difficult for Boric's government to achieve passage of key structural reforms of its program, such as tax reform, pension system reform and health reform. This situation, in a country expecting to see conclusive answers to problems that have been dragging on for decades, will be a factor of instability. In fact, it cannot be ruled out that mobilized pressure on Congress from the grassroots sectors may be needed to advance certain critical items.

On the other hand, Apruebo Dignity will have the challenge of being a government of transformation and not simply the administrator of the neoliberal crisis of transition from Pinochet's dictatorship. What place will former center-left Concertación cadres have in the government? What will be the relationship with the social movements? How wide will the possibilities of social participation be? These are questions that remain open and that will begin to be answered when the president-elect names his first cabinet.

Within the coalition there are different positions, but what is certain is that Apruebo Dignidad will need to broaden socially and politically, and the direction this broadening takes will be fundamental. However, what is clear is the favorable disposition that the new president will have towards the work of the Constitutional Convention. Gabriel Boric knows that one of the most important legacies he can

leave is the approval of a new Constitution during his term of office and that it will be his signature stamped on the text replacing the one imposed by the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

On the other hand, the approval of a Constitution that is expected to have a clear anti-neoliberal orientation will directly benefit Boric's government, since it will be a boost to the structural transformations proposed in his program and will help overcome obstacles from a divided Congress. An anti-neoliberal Constitution endorsed by the Chilean people with the possibility of general elections at the end of the constituent process could allow, along with the re-election of Boric, the election of a parliament more favorable to his reforms. But these hypotheses are only possibilities.

Beyond the difficulties that await the next government, and beyond the tensions and contradictions that will occur in the alliance sustaining it, we truly celebrate that in the second round of voting Chilean society has given a clear signal in favor of transformation. We celebrate that women and popular neighborhoods put a stop to the ultra-right. We celebrate that, after fifty years, the left is back in government.

In a country battered by decades of neoliberalism, today a new people is emerging. A people that claims the right to build its destiny with justice and dignity. These people are here to stay and to be the protagonists of their own history. And that is, at the end of the day, the good news this election has for us.

PIERINA FERRETTI

Sociologist trained at the University of Valparaiso, Master and PhD (c) in Latin American Studies from the University of Chile. She is a researcher at Fundación Nodo XXI.