IPS

INTERVIEWS 29.11.2023

‘Chilean society remains polarised’

Chile’s former President Michelle Bachelet on the 50th anniversary of the military coup, the dispute over the constitution and social inequality

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Chile’s military coup, in which the democratic socialist President Salvador Allende was violently deposed. After the coup, a military junta led by Augusto Pinochet ruled until 11 March 1990. You and your family were among those who were directly affected, and you later fled to East Germany. How are the effects of the coup and the dictatorship still being felt in Chile today?

> The bombing of the presidential palace on 11 September 1973 and the subsequent military junta totally changed Chile. That traumatic event, the human rights abuses, the crimes against humanity — all this continues to weigh heavily on Chilean society. Nothing can justify a military coup. Despite attempts at reconciliation, society remains polarised, and many families still feel the pain. There are more than 3 000 missing people whose families still don’t know where they ended up and what happened to them. It is an open wound in our hearts.
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> In Chile, there are those who continue to relativise and justify what happened. Obviously, we face unresolved social problems. Despite changes made by democratic governments, our constitution is nowhere near democratic enough, and our society is still burdened by the extremely neoliberal and individualistic economic model developed by Pinochet and his government. There is too little consideration of the collective ‘we’. There are, of course, very community-minded groups and people who come together to help others, but individualism in Chile is very complex and takes many forms. The pension reforms, in which community spirit is an important aspect, are a case in point. Many people simply want to keep their own pension fund, refusing to hear about generational justice.

In last year’s referendum, voters rejected the new constitution, and in the Constitutional Council elections in May, the far-right *Partido*

Republicano was the big winner — a party that opposes having a new constitution at all. Now, a new draft constitution has been put forward — what's the next step?

The 1980 constitution practically institutionalised the Pinochet dictatorship. The structures cemented by it don't represent Chilean society, they reflect a dark, anti-democratic chapter of the past. We need a new constitution that is born out of democracy and can be a framework for all Chileans. The results of the Constitutional Council elections reflect our current institutions and show how complex the political landscape in Chile is.

I'm very worried. While the results of the Constitutional Council elections were democratically legitimate, the council majority has been uncompromising in pushing through its ideas. For instance, the new draft constitution envisages tougher constraints on abortion, the deportation of migrants who enter the country illegally and a public sector strike ban. On 17 December, there will be a referendum on this draft.

Apart from a crisis of representative democracy, Chile is also facing a social crisis arising from the high levels of inequality, with huge protests taking place since 2019. How can the country overcome this democratic crisis and the massive loss of public trust in institutions and their representatives?

When the dictatorship came to an end, the proportion of people living in poverty was 48 per cent, with many of them facing extreme poverty. Since then, the various democratic governments have attempted to combat inequality and improve the situation in society. In some areas, there have been major improvements, but inequality persists — and not just in terms of income but also in terms of the quality of essential public services. That these social issues have not yet been adequately tackled is one of the reasons for the democratic crisis and for people's loss of trust in political institutions, political parties and their representatives.

We need to be self-critical and reflect, that would be the first step towards genuine dialogue with the political class. It's fundamental that citizens understand and support decision-making processes. Representative democracy and democratic participation are in crisis around the world. That's why we need to create space for citizens to participate in politics. During my administration, I worked with commissions, committees and groups of experts to try and develop a system in which many different groupings would be represented. I wanted to ensure it wasn't just experts who got their voices heard but groups within the community, too. Politics needs to be for the people,

and policies shouldn't be designed in such a way that people are always having to adapt. What is good for one person or section of the population – for a particular age group, social group or sex – isn't necessarily good for everyone else. There are vulnerable groups within society that are sometimes ignored by politics. That's why it's important to work intersectionally.

Can you give us an example?

Take the pandemic: everyone was vulnerable, anyone could catch the virus. But the old, sick, women, indigenous people or people of African heritage living in rural areas were more at risk than others. Often, these groups get ignored, but we need to listen to them: what are the demands of those who depend on external support? What's more, those with power and authority have a duty to be accountable to citizens. They have been in the past, and they need to be in the future too.

How can we foster belonging in a society that's increasingly divided?

When we talk about inequality, it's not just about differences in income, it's also about things like access to good education, decent healthcare and, of course, genuine social mobility. Education is a key factor. Not only does it give people the tools they need for professional and personal development, it also enables them to know and exercise their rights. We need to provide civic education. Children need to learn from a young age how important democracy and human rights are, but they also need to know their rights and duties as citizens to understand how vital dialogue and civic engagement are.

Fairer wealth distribution is another key factor. That includes taxing people fairly and also providing decent jobs and good pensions. With society polarised and no bloc having a majority in parliament, it's difficult to get the necessary measures introduced. Political processes, such as pension reform, can be very complex. But simply avoiding them endangers democracy and allows society to become even more polarised. People then feel like politicians are not addressing their genuine problems. As a result, trust declines, and democracy loses relevance. What's the point in going to vote if I put my faith in elected representatives, but they don't solve our problems?

Is there a way out of this crisis?

For progress to be made in this difficult context, we need to re-engage citizens. If people are to have a voice and be able to set things in motion at the grassroots level, their elected representatives need to

know that there's a price to pay if they don't deliver on what people need. When people are just treading water, they lose hope. But they need that hope. They need to have faith that their lives can get better. And they need to have hope that they will be treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. I believe all our politicians have a duty to create a more inclusive and equal country.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



Michelle Bachelet

Michelle Bachelet is a politician from the *Partido Socialista de Chile* and former President of Chile. She was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2018 to 2022.