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'We've finally left the dictatorship behind us'

Former presidential candidate Beatriz Sánchez on the upcoming presidential run-off between left and right and the path to a new constitution for Chile

The first round of the presidential election in Chile has led to a duel between the far-right Pinochet sympathiser José Antonio Kast and the young left-wing politician Gabriel Boric. The second will take place on 19 December. For the first time in 30 years none of the centre parties will be represented. What has happened to the political centre in Chile?

That's a good question. No doubt we'll be trying to answer it for a good few years to come. It's still too early for a conclusive analysis, but this much is clear: The parties that represent the political centre today are those that epitomised the democratic transition after the Pinochet dictatorship. This transitional period is now coming towards its end, ushered in by the social mobilisation that Chile has been experiencing since 2019. For the first time we have new key players who don't belong to these parties. It's been said so many times before that the transitional period is over. But now it really is. We've finally left the dictatorship behind us.

In the political debate the fact that human rights violations are a thing of the past has been interpreted to mean the end of dictatorship. But we've gradually come to realise – at least since the 2019 protests – that the dictatorship's brutal legacy has a far bigger dimension. The Pinochet regime implemented an ultra-neoliberalism that treated the state as merely an subsidiary player. This economic system also violates human rights, including fundamental rights to health, education, water and so on. Under Pinochet, all of life's necessities were turned into commodities. The dictatorship has deeply scarred politics, society, and culture in Chile. And that doesn't just stop overnight. Recovery is a process.

Now for the first time we have two presidential candidates who are not members of the traditional parties. Gabriel Boric is the first left-

wing candidate since Salvador Allende. And although his opponent José Antonio Kast was involved in the transition, today he represents a kind of neofascist post-Pinochetism on the hard right, along similar lines to Trump or Bolsonaro. Chile has never experienced such rhetoric – for example, against immigrants – before.

From a European standpoint, Boric is a social democrat. You supported him in the election campaign. He was ahead in the polls for a long time, but Kast managed to pull in front of him in the first round. How do you think Kast was able to catch up?

It has a lot to do with the upheavals that Chile has been going through. People have been through a lot. We're standing on the brink of a new era and asking ourselves who we were, who we are now, and what direction we'd like to take. That takes time. We need a new constitution and structural change. And the fear and uncertainty this gives rise to is fertile soil for emerging authoritarian leaders. Kast is exploiting people's fear of change. He knows how to exploit this situation, for example, by demonising immigrants. He's scored points with a simple security narrative. It's possible to describe Boric as "quite left-wing" in Chile because the goalposts have been shifted. But looking at his election programme he's really just a social democrat.

Not even half of the eligible voters actually cast a ballot in November. Why?

Chile has long been plagued by low turnout, not just since we've had free elections. Up to 2012 voting was compulsory, but registering in the electoral roll was not. Even at that time around 5 million people didn't vote. That means that many Chileans have never voted at all. For me that represents a political problem caused by the dictatorship.

The current constitution has led to an anti-politics, poor social cohesion, and a crude individualism. One way of putting this philosophy of life is that "if everyone is out for themselves everyone gets what they need". The value of community has no role in this individualistic mentality. Distrust is inevitable.

Our political structure is fundamentally undemocratic, giving the president extreme powers. The power of parliament, by contrast, amounts to little more than accepting or rejecting presidential proposals. People rightly wonder why we have a parliament when it can't really change anything.

This situation and the corruption that has come to light have devalued politics in Chile. We deluded ourselves into thinking that Chile is free from corruption, but it turns out that it's no different from anywhere else. Exposés of corruption were a bombshell

generating even more distrust in politics. That is clearly one reason for the low election turnout.

Politically, the two candidates, Boric and Kast, are almost diametrically opposed. Boric stands for social justice, while Kast would like to emulate Trump and Bolsonaro. Is Chile on the brink of further political and social polarisation?

Last year's referendum in which almost 80 per cent came out in favour of a new constitution shows that the country is not polarised and that a large majority would like to see structural change. The fact that the three richest electoral districts in Chile voted against a change indicates where the problem lies. The vote on the composition of the convention in May also exhibited a strong consensus. The conservative forces who wanted to block changes received less than a third of the votes.

When it comes to the presidential election, however, things look rather different. This is a clash between two contrasting visions of the country's future. But it would still be wrong to say that the country is split. Polarisation in Chile is mainly based on certain issues, such as migration and security.

Chile's current constitution largely derives from the Pinochet dictatorship. In 2019 thousands of people demonstrated for reform. In summer, the Constitutional Convention, of which you are a member, started its work. People's hopes are enormous, which must weigh on you. What are the most important issues that you and your colleagues are working on?

I'm lucky enough to be coordinating the committee on constitutional principles, democracy, and citizenship. For me, these issues are among the most important and pervade the whole constitution. In my view, the main article in the whole constitution is being formulated in this committee, namely that Chile is to become a democratic and social state under the rule of law and abandon neoliberalism. That makes a huge difference. In the constitution of 1980, the state is allotted only subordinate status. The state's hands were tied and responsible only for areas that the private economy had no interest in.

The old constitution expressly excluded people and their needs. The roots of the 1980 constitution are authoritarian. If you look at the discussions of the Constitutional Commission at that time it is clear that they were determined to prevent any revival of a left-wing alliance such as Unidad Popular at all costs. We are now trying to bring the citizens on board as much as possible. One of the things we're dealing with in my committee is thus the mechanisms of direct

democracy. That means not only that there should be more referendums or legislative initiatives, but also that the citizens should exercise more influence over political decision-making at various levels, for example, setting the state budget.

There is gender parity among members of the convention. Are you confident that its work represents a turning point for gender equality?

Definitely! One of the first regulations that has come into force lays down that all provisions must be free from violence against women. Another debate, which previously seemed light years away, concerns recognition of the care and reproductive work performed by women. That will affect not only the world of work and the pension system, but also the balance of power in society. Our current system is based on women's unpaid work. The moment we realise that this work is not "naturally" our responsibility, the power structure changes. There will be a paradigm change in favour of diversity.

There are 17 indigenous people in the convention, which is led by Elisa Loncón, a member of the Mapuche people. Is this an indication that the long hoped for strengthening of indigenous rights represents a further paradigm change?

Absolutely. The representation of indigenous people and gender parity in the convention is not only a strong outward symbol. The balance of power has changed. It is no accident that Elisa Loncón was elected chair of the Constitutional Convention. For me there is no question that in future Chile will be a plurinational state. We are grappling with what form plurinationality will take and how it will be implemented. The constitution will provide a concrete basis for this. The impetus must come from the indigenous peoples. We don't want to impose our views on plurinationality on them. We have to work it out together. We are learning from one another in the Convention.

What happens if Chile comes up with a progressive constitution, but then elects a right-wing president on 19 December?

A right-wing president would be a serious blow for the constitutional process. It is already difficult enough to work with the parliament in its current form. Progress is not rapid, quite the contrary. It would be even worse with a president committed to a strong presidency and utterly opposed to the Convention. Work on the new constitution hangs in the balance. It's being undermined from the outside. The media, which are in the hands of hostile forces, are taking pot-shots at it. A strongly dissenting president would be terrible. We mustn't forget that there is a referendum on the text of the constitution in

2022. In other words, the path to a progressive constitution for Chile is far from secure.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck.



Beatriz Sánchez
Santiago de Chile

Beatriz Sánchez is a journalist and politician of the left party alliance Frente Amplio in Chile. In 2017, she was a candidate for the Chilean presidency.