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'Women are the perfect instrument for the neoliberal system'

Former Chilean presidential candidate Beatriz Sánchez on feminism, climate change and left-wing parties in Latin America

Read this interview in German.

In Europe, we're discussing the weakness of traditional parties and the emergence of new political movements that are particularly attractive to young people. Is this comparable with the situation in Chile and Latin America?

Similar developments to those observed in Chile over the last five or six years can now also be witnessed in other parts of the world. I mean the emergence of new parties that are rooted in various types of social movement. I represent Frente Amplio (Broad Front), a large coalition comprising many small movements. The origins of FA lie in the large-scale student demonstrations of 2011. These events also coincided with the Arab Spring, Spain's anti-austerity Indignados movement, Occupy Wall Street, and other similar protests.

The 2011 student movement had two main slogans: "put an end to profit-making in education" and "universal access to high quality public education". Education in Chile is expensive, even public education. For the first time, people questioned whether every sphere of life in Chile really had to be commercialised. The leaders of the student movement were elected to parliament. Some of them were also involved in founding FA.

Why was Frente Amplio so successful?

The creation of FA challenged Chile's traditional political system, which, since the return to democracy, had been consistently bipartisan, with the right-wing parties on the one side and the centre-left parties on the other. As the new left-wing force, the FA flies in the face of the traditional left. The latter has always been guided by the

same political ideals as the centre right. Although we had a centre-left government in Chile, there was no significant change under this government. I would, therefore, put 'centre-left' in inverted commas here.

Although substantial progress was made in combatting poverty and improving living standards, at the same time, inequality increased dramatically. For many citizens, it became clear that the traditional centre-left camp was never going to undertake any kind of fundamental reform of the country's economic and social model. Yet, such reforms are sorely needed. So now Chile has three political blocs.

What's the current state of Chile's traditional left-wing camp?

The traditional left parties are currently in very bad shape, there are leadership struggles, and the smaller parties are even battling with political irrelevance. This decline has nothing to do with FA, however. We are not the cause but rather the consequence of this disintegration of the centre left. Our voters comprise citizens who have always supported centre-left parties but who now reject those parties' acceptance of the neoliberal model.

Ten years ago, Latin America was dominated by left-wing governments. How do we evaluate this so-called 'progressive decade'? Were there any structural changes?

Of course, in practice, the projects implemented by the left-leaning governments were all quite distinct. Rafael Correa's national project in Ecuador differed from that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Evo Morales in Bolivia, for instance. And some of these projects have fared better than others. Nobody mentions the Bolivian government anymore because it has been a success. The case of Venezuela, however, is on everyone's lips. Evo Morales has achieved some spectacular results. Naturally, there are still internal conflicts, however. Morales himself was a member of the indigenous activist movement and yet today finds himself in conflict with indigenous movements. And Correa has experienced something similar in Ecuador. He too found himself in conflict with indigenous groups and there was also a lack of a strong feminist movement during his time in office. He pursued a decidedly vertical style of politics, which is something I oppose. However, he did intend to make changes.

Argentina's former President, Cristina Kirchner, was another leader who demonstrated a very vertical approach to government. But both politicians also attempted to strengthen the state. These left-wing governments believed that the state had to play an active role. Previously in Latin America, it had been customary to limit the role of

the state. I really value these attempts by left-wing governments to find another system. They claimed that a different reality was possible. During the progressive decade, Latin America spearheaded global attempts to fundamentally reform the economic and social model.

On the other hand, something that people also clearly noticed was the cult of personality. I believe in a different type of leadership. The worst thing that could happen to us at the FA would be for leadership powers to be concentrated in the hands of just one person. I tend to favour the Uruguayan approach, which is focused more on projects than on individuals.

With the exception of Mexico, Latin America has recently witnessed right-wing parties achieve electoral success. Nevertheless, right-leaning governments in Argentina, Brazil, and Columbia, for example, are all struggling. What's the region's political outlook? Will neoliberal politics establish itself again in the long term or can the parties on the left benefit from this weakness?

Latin America has no tradition of left-wing governments. Those in government were traditionally members either of the military or the economic elite. Today we are undergoing a transformation. People are calling for alternative models and for political participation. But this is also creating a conservative backlash. Significant changes are certainly on the cards. But these changes will not occur overnight.

In 2019, Chile is hosting the UN Climate Change Conference COP 25. How important is climate policy for Chile, and for Latin America as a whole?

I think Latin America is lagging behind somewhat when it comes to this particular debate. There's not yet a clear awareness that climate change isn't just an issue reserved for hippies or tree-hugging Green party supporters. People have yet to acknowledge that the topic is closely related to lifestyle and the economic model. This correlation is not clearly understood by populations in Latin America. We talk about climate change, water scarcity, and precarious working conditions as if they are all distinct topics. We don't realise that what all these issues have in common is the neoliberal resource-based rentier model that dominates in the region.

The feminist movement has gained momentum in recent years. At the same time, however, conservative attacks on women's and minority rights are on the rise and the struggle against what have been dubbed "gender ideology" is also intensifying. As a presidential candidate, you campaigned for a feminist government. How was this received?

The reaction was harsh. But it's true that the feminist movement in Chile continues to grow. However, the extreme right-wing groups are also becoming increasingly important. Feminism is always being accused of failing to address the important issues such as public security and the fight against poverty. Moreover, feminism is perceived as having a decidedly urban and academic nature. In Chile today, however, there's much wider recognition that feminism and the gender issue are directly linked to the neoliberal system. Women are the perfect instrument for the neoliberal system. We'll keep things ticking along and we'll even do it for free! This is something that's now very clearly understood.

Why is the feminist movement so successful in Chile?

The movement is growing in a variety of different spheres, not only in academic or urban settings. We are also seeing feminism gain strength in rural areas and among trade unions. The extreme right initially attempted to ridicule the feminist movement but there was a strong backlash.

One example here is Chile's national women's football team. As the team was setting off for the World Cup in France, José Antonio Kast showed a picture of them next to an image of a feminist group announcing: "These are the women we want. Women who fight for Chile and their homeland. Not those others who are constantly angry." The team members countered with: "Don't use us. We are all feminists."

There's very strong feminist mobilisation in Chile. And the situation in Argentina is similar. Mobilisation there is based on the campaign for legal abortion. At the moment, abortion has been decriminalised, at least socially. For us, this is an amazing achievement. However, up until 2017, Chile remained one of the few countries in the world where abortion was completely outlawed.

The US government under President Donald Trump displays a very paternalistic approach towards Latin America. At the same time, Russia and China also have a growing presence. Europe, in contrast, largely treats Latin America with disinterest. Geopolitically, where do you envisage Chile and Latin America being positioned in future?

In Chile, international relations is rarely a topic of debate. When it comes to foreign affairs, the focus is always on business relations. The field of international relations is largely reduced to the negotiation of free trade agreements. Frente Amplio would like to completely change the approach to foreign affairs. We must turn our attention more to Latin America. Cooperation between the countries in the region must

be strengthened. And the European Union provides a good model for this.



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