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A ray of hope for Chile's battered democracy

A young, female, and left-wing Assembly will draft a new constitution for neoliberal, conservative Chile. This is good news for Chilean democracy

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Chile is finally embarking on a path towards a new constitution. Last weekend, Chilean voters elected the 155 members of the country's Constituent Assembly, which now carry the hopes of many people and the future of the country on their shoulders.

At the same time, the election result presents an earthquake for the country's political elite because the people gave their trust mainly to young, progressive and independent newcomers. Non-partisan candidates won 103 seats, 78 women are represented and 40 per cent of those elected are younger than 40 years old. In short, the Carta Magna will be written by a new political generation.

Many candidates from traditional parties, on the other hand, are left out. The big losers of this historic election are President Sebastian Piñera and his right-wing conservative government alliance *Chile Vamos*. Surprisingly, it won only 20 per cent of the votes and thus has no veto power in the Convention.

But the opposition's centre-left parties also didn't do well. The reasons are manifold: they ran with separate electoral lists, they have gambled away the trust of the citizens through corruption, clientelism and a lack of willingness for renewal, they do not offer a credible alternative and they are part of the country's small elite. Only the young alliance *Frente Amplio*, which first entered the political stage in 2017 and emerged from the strong student movement, was able to achieve good election results.

A new politics for Chile?

This election will permanently change Chile's political landscape. The

parties – no matter the political camp – now only represent a minority. Only two per cent of citizens identify with one of these parties, while 90 per cent believe that no laws are passed in the common interest but only for the benefit of the economy. These are frightening figures in a representative democracy. In addition to the serious social problems and injustices in Chile, they explain the continuing anger of many people, the violent political unrest since mid-2019 and, of course, the current election results.

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Chileans don't expect solutions from the established parties, but from independent representatives of the people. Some analysts interpret this as a push towards democratisation, since the people are now in charge. Others predict the end of representative democracy. What's clear is that the defenders of the status quo are done and the reform-oriented forces present the majority in the Convention.

Chances are therefore high that in 2022 a more public welfare-oriented Basic Law will be ratified that defines new rules of the game between market and state. This would fulfil the central demand of the protest movement. 'Neoliberalism was born in Chile and must die here too' was one of the protesters' slogans.

Since the dictator Augusto Pinochet established a neoliberal economic system with the help of the pro-market group of economists called the Chicago Boys in the 1970s, the Andean state has been considered one of the most 'business-friendly' countries in the world. As a political legacy, Pinochet left behind a constitution in 1990 in which the role of the state was reduced to a bare minimum. Since then, education, health, pensions have been almost completely privatised. This also applies to essential goods such as the water supply.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the social problems of the South American country in the last 12 months. Unemployment, poverty and hunger are on the rise. In the capital Santiago alone, homelessness increased by a whopping 235 per cent in 2020.

Therefore, people associate great hopes with the new constitution. They expect a solution to all the pent-up social, political and economic problems. But a new constitution does not necessarily usher in rapid, far-reaching change, as numerous examples around the world have shown. It will probably take several years before the new constitution actually has an impact on people's everyday lives. The process is important, but it

cannot solve Chile's serious challenges today. The suffering middle class needs immediate help.

A more social-democratic, just and inclusive country

Whether the path towards a more social-democratic development model in Chile can succeed depends primarily on four factors.

First, the fragmented left-wing forces in the assembly must succeed in forming an alliance across numerous party and organisational boundaries, across personal disputes and substantive differences. Many members are newcomers and inexperienced in negotiating compromises. If they succeed in securing majorities, they will be able to push through their common demands.

If all this succeeds, Chile will become a more social-democratic, just and inclusive country.

Second, the country's economic and conservative elite must accept that it is time to give up on their privileges. The richest 10 per cent have benefited greatly from the economic model based on the exploitation of raw materials in recent decades. Even if these forces are now only have marginal representation in the Constituent Assembly, strong headwinds against any kind of progressive change can be expected from their side.

Thirdly, after the initial euphoria, the constitutional process must avoid losing legitimacy all too quickly. It must be accepted by the majority of Chileans as an institutional way out of the crisis. Otherwise, the country risks further polarisation and a return to the struggle in the streets. Voter turnout was only 40 per cent, raising doubts over whether a large part of society perceives this as 'their' process.

Fourth, there must be sufficient economic and social stability in the next 12 months to draft the constitution and avoid a conservative, populist backlash 'á la Bolsonaro'. This cannot be taken for granted in times of pandemic, which, according to the United Nations Economic Commission, threatens to set the country back in its level of development by up to 20 years.

If all this succeeds, Chile will become a more social-democratic, just and inclusive country. And the politics of renewal and shift towards a more left-wing, more feminine, more diverse politics would be sustainable.

If it does not succeed, the current constitution from the era of dictator Pinochet will remain in place. This scenario holds a lot of explosive potential. However, it is already historic that democratically elected representatives – and not the military – are writing the constitution in Chile for the first time since 1812. Chile is also the first country in the world to have a Constituent Assembly with equal representation of women and men. This is good news for democracy.



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