

Weekly Report - 24 May 2005

CHILE: Piñera candidacy could mark the end of an era

The emergence of a second rightwing candidate, Sebastián Piñera of Renovación Nacional (RN), not only opens up new possibilities for the current electoral contest, but also points to the manner in which Chile may ease itself out of the two-coalition system that has governed its politics for the past 15 years. His appearance already threatens the chances of Concertación frontrunner Michelle Bachelet winning in the first round, and those of rival rightwinger Joaquín Lavín reaching the runoff.

Piñera, a former senator (1989-93), main shareholder of the airline LAN-Chile and holder of considerable interests in banking and communications, was nominated by RN as its candidate on 14 May. Lavín, of the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), promptly challenged him to contend in primaries for nomination as the candidate of the Alianza por Chile coalition. He was unequivocally turned down. RN president Sergio Díez said: 'The best primary is the December election. Piñera is a candidate, not a pre-candidate.' Piñera himself suggested that Lavín should emulate his own gesture of 1999, when he stepped aside to allow Lavín's unopposed nomination. He added: 'The objective is to reach the runoff.'

To all intents and purposes, this marks the dissolution of the Alianza por Chile. In the opposing camp, the ruling Concertación por la Democracia, rival candidates Bachelet (Socialist) and Soledad Alvear (Christian Democrat) have reacted to these developments by reaffirming that they will contend in open primaries on 31 July. For now, then, this coalition holds together.

Things may change along the road if Piñera proves that he can overtake Lavín and end up facing Bachelet in the runoff. The first polls suggest that he stands a chance. A survey conducted by Mori just before Piñera's nomination was announced revealed the following figures: Bachelet 52%, Lavín 40%, and Alvear 14.5%. Another conducted just afterwards by Feedback for La Tercera, revealed the impact: Bachelet fell by 8 points to 44%, Lavín by 19.1 points to 20.9%, Piñera landed in third place with 16.4%, and Alvear was down to 9.1%. [Worth noting: if these are compared back to the previous Feedback poll, Bachelet loses only 2.2 points, Lavín 10.7, and Alvear 5.4 - but the trends are roughly proportional.]

At this point, if the Concertación holds together and retains its current combined votes, it looks able to win in the first round. What will merit close attention is whether Piñera, coming up from behind on the right, can manage to divert some of the voters away from Alvear. If so, the Christian Democrat party (DC), or at least its right wing, might feel tempted to join forces with RN, with which it has a range of affinities. It is worth remembering that the DC reluctantly accepted a candidate from the Socialist camp, Ricardo Lagos, in the last election, and this time feels cheated of well-deserved recognition for having engineered most of the Concertación victory in last year's municipal elections [WR-04-43]. This could lead to a scenario in which the Chile de los tercios ('Chile of the thirds') reappears with a new structure: one third right (UDI), one third 'centre' (RN plus DC or its right wing), and one third left (Socialists, Partido por la Democracia and parties leftward). This has been envisaged as a possible development by a number of Chilean analysts for some time now.

That it has not so far materialised has been mainly due to the perception that two big coalitions were necessary, however deep the divisions within them. Piñera need not win, only reach the second round and narrowly lose, to alter this perception.