

Chile's Political System Shaken by Rise of New Anti-Neoliberal Left

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The first round of Chile's [presidential election](#) was held on November 19. The right-wing candidate, ex-president Sebastian Pinera, won with 36% of the votes. He will compete in the second round against centre-left candidate Alejandro Guillier.

But the big surprise was the result for the [Broad Front](#) (Frente Amplio, FA), a heterogeneous left coalition headed by Beatriz Sanchez. The FA candidate came in third, with 20% of the vote (just two points short of making the second round).

The coalition also won 18 deputies and a senator, which is unheard of for an anti-neoliberal force outside of the traditional parties.

Viento Sur's Brais Fernandez spoke with Luis Thielemann, an activist with Autonomous Left (one of the organizations with parliamentary representation within the FA), about the elections and the rise of this new left formation.

Brais Fernandez (BF): What is your analysis of the results of Chile's elections?

Luis Thielemann (LT): First, it's clear that the result, for any observer, was a complete surprise. Although looking at it now we can see that there were many signs pointing to the possibility of a high vote for the FA, the truth is that no one believed it was possible to go into double digits. Polls showed it with about 8% support, and the history of the left in the past three decades in Chile is one in which it has never surpassed this limit.

Moreover, the FA went to the elections without the backing of the biggest left force in the country – in terms of history, number of activists and organising capacity: the Communist Party. In this context, the first point is the surprise factor.

The second is the political chaos that has been generated in Chile. If the FA is seeking to alter the balance of forces that has dominated Chile for almost three decades since the final years of the dictatorship, it has still not achieved this. But [the election] was a big step forward in this direction: it created electoral uncertainty, not only in terms of the second round, but for years to come in Chile.

In this way, the FA went from being ignored by the traditional political forces, to being the third political force in a system accustomed to only two players. And it is not just any third force, but one whose program is based on the big anti-neoliberal social struggles of the past decades.

Lastly, it was a gratifying vote for the FA, which had been accused of elitism by Communist

and Socialist Party activists, due to its origins on the university campuses and middle-class neighbourhoods.

In the poorest neighbourhoods of Santiago, the FA vote was surprisingly high, in many cases beating the candidate of the [New Majority](#) (Nueva Mayoría), [Alejandro Guillier](#).

This demonstrated grassroots work among the popular classes that, perhaps because of its incipient and discreet nature, had been missed by many observers, including those from the left.

BF: What is the FA, where does it come from, who is part of it?

LT: The FA was officially created in 2017, but the idea of its formation has been broadly shared by the left since the 2011 student mobilizations [for free education].

That it was broadly held does not mean that there were no important tactical and strategic differences between the different forces, as its formation has been one of the main discussion points within the left for the past few years.

It is made up of 13 organizations, that go from the small but important Liberal Party to Marxist and libertarian organizations.

The broadness of the FA reflects two aspects of Chilean politics: how far to the right politics has shifted (to the point where the Liberal Party feels comfortable in a coalition to the left of [incumbent New Majority president Michelle] Bachelet), where a minimal reform of neoliberalism is seen by the Chilean right as a Jacobin proposal.

And second, the social and political diversity of the opposition to neoliberalism and the authoritarian democracy inherited from the dictatorship [as part of the post-dictatorship transition pact between the parties of the right and centre-left].

The FA was the result of a maturing of various experiences. The first was the defeat of the 2006 student movement, which was defeated by the technocratization of its conflict by [the parties of] the transition pact in 2008.

Then there was the process of learning that the student and social movements of 2011 went through as a result of the creation of its own autonomous political leadership and its open rupture with the transition pact parties.

These movements – in particular the student movement – set up a series of radical left political organizations before, during and after 2011. Some of them have since disappeared, been refounded, split or fused.

The stand out organizations are Democratic Revolution (the strongest group in the FA), Autonomous Left (iA) and Autonomist Movement (a group that emerged out of a split from iA), among others. To these groups we can add those small parties that come from the extra-parliamentary left that emerged during the decades of the transition, such as the Humanist Party, the Green Ecologist Party, Equality Party, etc.

A third camp includes those parties that were formed as split-offs from the Coalition of Parties for Democracy [the centre-left coalition known as Concertación, which predates the

New Majority]. They saw in the FA the possibility of having a political impact, even if they do not have a clear or ideologically coherent left position. Within this group are parties such as Power or the Liberal Party.

The unifying element has been, on the one hand, the political window of opportunity that the crisis of the transition pact represents. Within this is seen the possibility of imposing or pushing forward the demands of the social movements that have challenged neoliberalism. These include the movement for public education, the university professors strikes, the movement against the AFPs (private administrators of pension funds), environmental struggles, to renationalize water and natural resources, etc.

What these struggles have tended to unite a social layer that has decided to stop looking to the Concertacion as a vehicle for potentially putting an end to the enduring legacy of the dictatorship; who got tired of seeing promises for reforms converted into the deepening of the model. This layer revealed itself on November 19 to be the third political force and 20% of voters.



Beatriz Sanchez launches her candidacy for the Chilean presidential election, in Santiago on April 3.

BF: What position will the FA take in the second round?

LT: This is the main issue of debate for the coming weeks. The second round will be on December 17, which means we don't have much time.

We knew there would not be any time to debate this issue, nor peace of mind, as the level of political pressure placed on the FA since [November 19] has been enormous. But of course, no one thought that the FA would be key to the outcome of the presidential elections, as no one expected we would win 20% of the vote.

Given all this, some forces, such as iA, argued that the issue of negotiating with Guillier on the basis of the programmatic points put forward by FA candidate Beatriz Sanchez, and that have emerged out of the social struggles (end AFPs, free education, etc.), should have been resolved before the first round.

Despite there being no debate, the FA has shown clarity on two important points: it will not accept positions in any eventual Guillier government, and will only support him on the basis of Guillier publicly committing to aspects of the FA program and with the aim of avoiding a right-wing government.

We are not dealing here with left forces that are debating among themselves on a university campus, but a political alliance in which one out of five voters has deposited their faith. These voters have not asked the FA to adopt a maximalist anti-everyone position, or to give carte blanche support to Guillier and the transition pact.

Instead, voters want us to, as much as possible, put an end to the legacy of the dictatorship, and begin a new cycle of democratization and expel the market from peoples' everyday lives.

We know that this is very little and mediocre compared to the dreams of those in Petrograd 100 years ago [during the Russian Revolution]. But before dreaming about storming the

Winter Palace, before even thinking whether it makes sense to storm palaces, we have to at least build the conditions to make this possible; we have to at least recuperate the possibility of doing left politics in Chile.

But the FA is 13 groups. Some have already said that they will decide their position internally and without discussing it with others, abusing their parliamentary hegemony within the left.

Others have said that they will not negotiate at all, which also prevents us from doing politics this month.

It is important to make a point here: left politics is not about remaining pure, about being the best martyrs.

Left politics is about provoking chaos, the decomposition of the forces of capital, and at the same time, rebuilding a force capable of imposing another politics, new relations of power, that tend towards expelling capitalism and building communism.

It is a slow process, but it is fought at every step, no matter how institutional or unimportant they seem to be.

Refusing to support Guillier in the second round might seem like the most radical position, but in reality it is a conservative position: it gives the political initiative to those who have always held it, reducing the FA's electoral result to a mere protest vote.

The FA should propose a negotiation that, whether accepted or rejected, will produce chaos among the neoliberal parties and the party system that has maintained them for decades.

If Guillier accepts the proposal for a government that pushes genuinely anti-neoliberal reforms, the transition pact will end up being destroyed; if, on the other hand, he makes no changes that are of interest for the FA, he will not be able to win the presidential elections.

What the FA is seeking in the second round is the possibility of directly impacting on the level of decomposition of the transition pact, and perhaps even beginning the process of its open destruction.

Translated from Spanish by Federico Fuentes (Socialist Project).

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