

Security and Stability: The Opportunity for Politics to Escape the Swamp

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Since the beginning of this year, 2024 has been seen as complex for Latin America, with significant changes in political leadership and economic matters. The ECLAC¹, announced that the year 2023 ended with a growth rate of 2.2% and projects a decline to 1.9% for the current year, setting back the per capita GDP level by 10 years, thereby reducing the well-being of the Latin American population and leading to insufficient measures to reduce the still high rates of poverty and informality plaguing the region. The most pessimistic forecasts anticipate deceleration, disinflation, debt, and deglobalization.

In political terms, this year will be marked by significant electoral activity in Latin America, with six presidential elections: El Salvador, Mexico, Uruguay, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, as well as territorial elections such as those in Chile. Additionally, all eyes will be on Brazil and Argentina. In Brazil, we will see if Lula can continue to maintain his approval ratings despite strong

1 Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin America and the Caribbean. Santiago: CEPAL (2023).

opposition and if he will remain the regional leader. For Argentina, attention will be focused on Milei, his drastic and tough policies, and his lack of parliamentary majorities.

Throughout these elections, Latin American governments will continue to face threats that are damaging the rule of law, democracy, and governance. These threats include organized crime, systemic corruption, and authoritarian populism. As a result, it is highly likely that there will be a backlash vote against governing coalitions, the occurrence of run-off elections without clear majorities, divided and unstable governments, and populist candidates.

From a political-electoral analysis, the CEIUC² argues that it is necessary to consider the main political risks for this year in the region. The ranking is led by insecurity, organized crime, and drug trafficking. However, the second place is occupied by the increase in corruption and impunity, a problem that has been lingering for years and shows a worrying rise. The concentration of power and collusion among political and economic elites increases the opacity of state bureaucracies, while informality and the culture of illegality contribute to the entrenchment of corruption in civil society. Democratic disaffection once again occupies advanced positions, ranking third, due to a profound crisis of representation affecting confidence in traditional political parties and shifting expectations towards new leadership with limited structure and management experience, preventing them from having solid bases of governance upon

2 Centro de Estudios Internacionales de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

assuming power. Governance under pressure and the rapid loss of support from leaders ranks fourth, followed by the increase in migratory flows, a subject of enormous complexity with no clear solution in the region. In the second tier of the index are the radicalization of social protests (6th place), international instability (7th place), deterioration of the business climate (8th place), the impact of technology on politics (9th place), and lastly, vulnerability to climate change (10th place).

Due to all of the above, fortunately, the dominance of left-wing governments in Latin America since the beginning of 2023 has been reduced by victories of right-wing governments in Paraguay, Ecuador, and Argentina, and something similar could occur for the current year. If this were to happen, the regional political landscape would be less homogeneous, with no predominant majority forces.

During this year's territorial elections, Chile will continue to face the three underlying crises that extend throughout the region: (1) a governance crisis, with institutions being questioned where it is evident that levels of trust in public entities remain low, discontent regarding the quality of public services continues to rise, and social media is increasingly amplifying societal demands that the State is unable to efficiently address; (2) an expectations crisis, with damaged trust among the citizenry. Governments have failed to adapt to social change. While citizens operate under a contemporary logic, with digitization as an accelerator, the State and its institutions continue to operate at old-fashioned paces; and (3) a crisis of

certainties, given the levels of economic and political uncertainty.

In its Political Situation Report³ for 2024, *Libertad y Desarrollo* argues that it is pertinent to evaluate the impact that the constitutional process of 2023 had on the current political landscape. Firstly, it is noted that after four years, the constitutional agenda has been extinguished, at least until the end of this administration. This is positive news for the country and a good opportunity for the political class, as it opens a window of opportunity to reconnect with the real priorities of citizens. On a political level, the constitutional plebiscite did not provoke a widespread citizen impact. Presidential approval ratings continue to hover around 30%, with no capitalization on this by either the Government or the President. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the security crisis remains the most addressed political discussion topic and is compounded by the increasingly relevant issue of corruption, which has further alienated citizens from politics after the Convenios Case, Hermosilla Case, and other scandals. This has been extremely challenging for the government and the ruling coalition to confront and address, especially considering that they have been champions of transparency and probity for the past 10 years as distinctive aspects of their political action.

The conditions following the constitutional year require maximum effort in terms of unity among all center and right-wing forces. This aligns with the report from *Libertad y Desarrollo*, firstly because the ruling party will attempt to

3 Fundación Libertad y Desarrollo, Informe de Coyuntura Política 2024.

exploit weak points within the opposition, meaning those areas with no unified opposition view, which represents opportunities to advance their reforms. The Pension Reform case reflects the above, in terms of the ruling party's ability to garner support from “non-aligned” opposition forces such as the PDG and Democrats. This allowed them to successfully pass their pension proposal in the Chamber of Deputies, which divides the 6% increase in contributions into 3% for individual accounts and the other 3% for a redistributive fund. The Senate will be a second litmus test for the center and the right, as it will demonstrate the ability of the broad opposition spectrum to maintain cohesion, discipline, and conviction in defending positions with high levels of citizen support. This includes the fact that 100% of the increase in contributions should be allocated to individual pension accounts for affiliates.

Another issue that will require unity and complicity within our sector is the need to establish a policy of alliances among opposition forces. Only through this can the opposition effectively address the challenge of achieving effective unity for the municipal and regional electoral cycle, which will take place in October of this year. Despite all the problems the government has experienced, President Boric's solid 30% approval rating, combined with left-wing presidential leadership, has seen an increase in approval levels. Additionally, the fact that the government forces have already consolidated a broad electoral alliance from the Christian Democrats to the Communist Party, could make the ruling party a competitive electoral force in the municipal, regional, parliamentary, and presidential arenas.

Furthermore, it seems increasingly clear that the Socialist Party is gaining momentum within the ruling coalition as it develops a close complicity with the Broad Front. While it is true that in Latin America, there has been a strong surge of opposition, with 8 out of 10 elections being won by forces opposing the current government, this number is not a guarantee of success in Chile itself unless the unity of the domestic opposition is strengthened. Therefore, we must enhance stronger and more impactful leadership, foster opinion organization, and above all, enforce discipline.

Attention must be paid to historical figures in contemporary politics. The emergence of these personalities in the constitutional campaign of 2023 may have gained momentum, with the most significant being the return to the public sphere of former president Michelle Bachelet as a potential presidential candidate for the ruling party in the 2025 elections. Her performance in the constitutional campaign, combined with the public support she has given to the government and her own positive image (which reaches 57% according to the Cadem survey of the 3rd week of March), has positioned her once again with a seemingly solid foundation to consider competing again. Likewise, in the latest Pulso Ciudadano survey, with fieldwork conducted in March, the former president reached 8.1% in presidential preferences (a 3 pp increase from January), placing her in third position after Mayor Evelyn Matthei (24.9%) and José Antonio Kast (11.7%), and ahead of other candidates from the sector such as Minister Camila Vallejo (4.5%).

The ICP agrees that during these almost two years of Gabriel Boric's administration, it became clear that approximately one-third of the population supports the Government. Although it is true that only a 30% approval rating is not good news for any government, it is worth remembering that governments have cycles expressed in citizen approval figures. In this regard, when observing trends, governments start with good approval ratings, only to decrease as the months progress, reaching their worst results during the second and third year of their term, and finally gradually recovering during the fourth year. Taking these factors into consideration, the one-third of support that President Boric receives today ceases to be a liability and becomes a potential asset. Thus, comparing with the previous two governments, it is observed that today President Boric enjoys greater support than former Presidents Bachelet and Piñera had at the same point in their respective final terms. Secondly, the approval ratings of former Presidents Bachelet and Piñera were substantially higher at the time of the presidential elections that chose their successors.

In this context, it could be argued that it is possible for the current government to achieve higher approval ratings by the end of next year. This means that the governing coalition has the potential to face the next presidential election competitively, especially if their candidate is someone like Michelle Bachelet, who enjoys broad public support and is capable of uniting various factions of the left, from the parties of the former Concertación to the FA and PC. In light of this scenario, and despite the international trends mentioned earlier, where opposition forces have won the majority of the

elections they contest, no political faction can assume that the upcoming presidential elections are predetermined. Therefore, the call for this year is unity, electoral intelligence, and, above all, demonstrating guarantees of stability.

Furthermore, for the Chilean right, the 2021 municipal election marked their lowest performance since 2000. They secured 87 mayoralties, a significant drop from their peak of 145 mayors. This year, the focus is on regaining lost ground, aiming to recover the municipalities that were lost.

It's highly likely that in these elections, the balance of elected officials will be evenly split between both sectors, which is advantageous for the current opposition given that security, organized crime, and drug trafficking remain the electorate's primary concern. This represents an opportunity for the right to gain trust by demonstrating their commitment to tackling these issues with urgency and decisiveness. However, the alliances formed among the six non-officialist parties — the two center parties, the three from Chile Vamos, and the Republican Party — are also crucial. These alliances need to demonstrate governance and ensure stability to the votes.