

Chile: wrong way

Last Wednesday night we could watch, for the last time, a restrictive debate between the two remaining candidates for next January 15th presidential election in Chile. It was, in fact, the debate between a president – Mr. Piñera - and a candidate – Mrs. Bachelet -.

Restrictive debate ? Of course, when you are not allowed to debate directly with your opponent – as required by Mrs. Bachelet -, or when questions tend to be superfluous, or repetitive – where no one could change his or her mind - . Or when certain areas that should be publicly discussed are out of question, as the important but cloudy familiar and political past life of Mrs. Bachelet.

Moreover, the real one sided debate has been going on on the streets fuelled by the present Concertacion government, that has not avoided any measure, possibly including the distribution of money, to avoid the change of power to the opposition candidate. Examples are slowly coming into surface: recent investigations of electoral corruption in Greater Valparaiso, the second largest city in this country, do point in that direction, but have been tamed by an orderly slow advance in judicial due process.

Or you can observe what the government is trying to do with the legislative process, where laws with no real content are being sent to distract public opinion – binominal system or labor laws -; or where members of it, like the opposition Senate President, are coerced to keep silent in their criticism of President Lagos ´ last overplayed role in this election, with a censure vote; or where the salient Supreme Court President lauds the present government for keeping judicial independence intact, after the same government got from it questionable “prescription sentences“ that avoid the inconvenient deeper look into corruption scandals from the Ministry of Public Works, that could ultimately implicate the now salient President Lagos, among others, for his role as minister in that area at the time of the irregular payments and transfers.

The truth is that this election is not fair and even tainted with corruption. It could not be fair when the whole government machinery – even the distant but quite effective domestic IRS and electorally useful labor inspectors - is against the opposition candidate and his supporters in every constructive proposition he tries to make; when you perceive a disturbing menacing tone and no useful and positive ideas from newly elected parliamentary members. A battle of ideas has been transformed into a battle of civilized but brute force.

The way it is going on, this will be a quiet but coerced election.

Sounds like Venezuela ? Not that extreme, but sadly closing ranks with it.

The worst part is that Mrs. Bachelet, to any impartial viewer, keeps showing a pretty undefined and confused message, with no real command over her program or her court. She does not inspire presidential respect, and if elected, that is no good news for Chile. In this sense, we should be reminded about what happened in Argentina with President Fernando

de la Rúa, disrespected and then fired, and finally replaced with another Latin American style caudillo who dangerously keeps concentrating power while spurring a one time economic growth opportunity using inherited idle capacity that will not keep apace under present circumstances.

A real and positive alternative in Chile could be lost, with an energetic and well prepared Mr. Piñera, who knows what to do to make this country part of the modern world, led by the US, and who certainly perceives that there is even today a long route to development. There is no time to waste when inefficiencies in competition in capital markets, labor markets and the heavy structure of the state remain untouched. And this he knows, and has the capability and attitude to promote deep and needed reforms.

Countries can change in 4 years: Mrs. Bachelet exemplifies just a resting station; Mr. Piñera brings new life and air to replace a too ingrained and self benefited Concertacion government and its associates. As of now, Concertacion Inc could be a better description of what our country is turning into after 16 years, whereas we really need a well managed and entrepreneurial Chile Inc., especially for its poor members.

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