

# Letter from Chile

**Miguel Silva**

.....

Last December, ex-student-leader Gabriel Boric defeated a right-wing candidate and won the second round of the presidential election in Chile. His mobile phone was bombarded with calls from presidents from all over the world, including one from Joe Biden. He will be sworn in as president on the 11th of March.

Gabriel Boric's victory has been said to put an end to the long transition from Pinochet's dictatorial regime to a normal democracy. It is said that it marks the start of a second transition, towards a new and different country with less inequality and more human rights.

His electoral coalition, the Frente Amplio, or Broad Front, has come a long way from being a small group founded only five years ago to lead the fight for change in parliament. The nature and extent of this change is the subject of this article.

To get a representative version of the formation of the Frente Amplio (FA), I asked one of those present during the negotiations to write down how he remembered the period:

It was 2016 and we were coming out of municipal elections marked, once again, by the dispersion of our progressive forces. That label included elements from liberals to social democrats and "revolutionaries," and we faced the task of gathering the widest possible combination to be able to confront the parliamentary and presidential elections in a more or less dignified way.

In that year, for the first time, the diffuse progressive sector included several legalized political parties, each of which represented a well-defined political line and could be brought together in a broader project.

During the municipal elections of 2016, and in spite of our dispersion, some progressive parties nevertheless had a few victories and we could count on some councillors and a well-known mayor in Valparaíso.

And we mustn't forget that the coming parliamentary elections would be fought under a revamped electoral

system that opened the possibility of winning, to sectors historically excluded by the old binomial system.

And, finally, some progressives had already been elected to parliament who, in spite of the inevitable wheeling and dealing, were already very well thought of by the population.

Although the attempt to achieve unity before the municipal elections of 2016 was unsuccessful, in January 2017 the Humanist Party, Green Ecologist Party, Democratic Revolution Party, Liberal Party, Power Party, Equality party, Autonomous Left, Autonomous movement, the Libertarian Left and the Pirate Party, were all brought together.

From the start, the character of the new moment was debated: How left wing, how centrist, how democratic, how radical, etc?

The central positions were between those who saw that the fundamental contradiction to face was that between neoliberalism and democracy, and those who insisted that the real contradiction was capital v/s labour. In the end pragmatism prevailed, and we all agreed that only the first option offered the possibility of getting hold of a part of the cake offered by the end of the binomial system.

So there we have it: the FA was formed as a broad front to elect parliamentary and council representatives under the new conditions marked by the ending of the binomial system.

However, at the same time, a series of scandals and movements were creating pressure which was to blow in October 2019 when the country exploded.

On the one hand there were the price fixing scandals, the enormous military and police corruption cases and the economic stagnation. On the other, protests against pollution and water shortages, the first successful legal changes which made abortion legal—under some circumstances—the movement against the terrible pension system and a flourishing feminist movement.

## **The rise (and fall?) of the October revolt**

Starting with secondary school kids who jumped the barriers in the metro on 18 October 2019, millions came out onto the streets, many for the first time. Of course, some organised gangs of thieves used the marches and barricades as a good opportunity to steal what they could sell from the supermarkets. Others on the streets set fire to buses and metro stations out of frustration, or because they believed that violence is our right.

Whatever the case, a march of a million people in the centre of Santiago followed a month of the supermarkets, schools, council offices, petrol stations and health centres being shut. A few days later, a “general strike,” which was really a centralised call for marches and barricades, had a big impact. Three days later, right-wing president Piñera negotiated a deal to allow a new constitution to be written on condition that those who signed the agreement (including Gabriel Boric) would be “responsible” in the protests, otherwise the army could be ordered to shoot “looters” and those “hooligans” on the barricades.

That agreement, on November 15, has been interpreted by the more radical organisations as being a sell-out. They see it as proof that Boric and the Frente Amplio was, and is, just one more version of the previous “Concertacion” reformist governments. On the other hand, Gabriel Boric, now to be the next president, and who signed the deal as an individual, has always said that the deal formed the real basis for the new constitutional process.

That process has included many feminists, water-rights and ecological activists and indigenous peoples in the elections of delegates to the constitutional convention. As such, Boric insisted (and insists) it was a deal that pushed the movement forward.

Well, the plebiscite which was called to approve (or not) the writing of a new constitution convinced more than half the eligible population to vote, even under Covid restrictions. As such, it was the base from which sprang the election of delegates for the constitutional convention. Many delegates were very young, many unknown outside their social organisations; many were feminists; many from climate and pollution action groups; many are teachers or lawyers. They have spent the past few months organising the process of creating the new constitution and are just about to start approving the first version.

Meanwhile, while they were hard at work opening up the new constitution process, the growing visibility of young and apparently intelligent and honest new faces was having its effect on the right. The tired and tarnished image of Pinochet supporters expanded to include ex-Christian Democrats and people who talked about human rights.

But just before the start of the presidential elections in November, a new, shining-bright and self-confident leader from the ultra-right, José Antonio Kast, gathered support around him. He was against the new constitution, against feminism, against gay rights and insisted that what was best for the country would be to return to the heady neoliberal days of the eighties. A sort of Pinochet 2.0.

He organised broad sections of the right behind him after defeating the “liberal” wing of the right, and also Gabriel Boric, in the first phase of the presidential elections. However, the shock of that

victory convinced another half a million people to go out and vote against him in the run-off, and Gabriel Boric won easily.

Since then, Boric has been sounding out his allies over the terms of a “governability” agreement. Talks have been going on with the various parties that make up the FA and with the electoral alliance that includes both the FA and the Communist Party. He hasn’t only negotiated with his close allies but also with the old Concertacion parties like the Socialist Party and the independents,

The list of ministers and sub-secretaries that has been the outcome of those negotiations includes a majority of women ministers, a gay teacher as minister of education, three communist ministers and a subsecretary in charge of gender policy who used to be a leader of the domestic servants’ union.

However, two very orthodox economists are in charge of the economy. One of them served under Concertacion governments for years.

### **Reality and appearance**

In his acceptance speech, Gabriel Boric repeated many things we heard millions of people discussing during the marches after October 2019. And indeed, he started his speech in Mapudungun, the language of the indigenous Mapuche people.

But plans for change, he repeated, have to be gradual to be real. You shouldn’t make changes, he insisted, that you have to reverse afterwards.

In essence, he argued, his government will be one that will not make all the changes at once and that will not spend money it hasn’t got yet. In that sense, his acceptance of the November 15 agreement, the negotiations with other sectors after his election and the very nature of the FA fall into the same pattern of a government of controlled and responsible change.

Indeed, the actual government of Piñera, a right-wing billionaire, is reinforcing the “be helpful and reasonable when you can” politics espoused by Boric. Piñera has been implementing policies during his last months in power which include some of the ideas supported by Boric. For example, a universal pension minimum. Of course, Piñera includes all sorts of conditions behind this facade of change, but the facade itself strengthens Boric’s approach. Perhaps the right thinks that Boric will sober up when he faces the real trouble the economy is in and stop spouting off wild ideas about so many changes.

It is true that part of the nature of the next government will be imposed by the economy. The actual government made various attempts to raise buying power during the Covid emergency, but the impact of their additions to and withdrawals from pension

funds will wind down by the end of the year. After that, the economy will probably revert to its stagnating pre-Covid state, and Gabriel Boric will face the consequences.

But for the moment, Gabriel Boric's reasonable argument has won the battle with those in the more radical movements.

### **The government, the constitutional convention and the power of the right**

Gabriel Boric will assume the presidency on March 11, with a parliament in which the forces allied to the FA do not hold a majority.

That parliament can block or rewrite the laws needed to implement the major policy planks of his government and which rose to prominence during the October revolt. Demands such as for free health care and the end of the private individual pension system are still very popular. Less inequality and taxes on the super-rich and on the mining multinationals to fund the changes are popular "common sense."

However, these changes will have to pass through the hostile parliament, as will all those enabling laws which a new constitution will need in order to convert its phrases and principles into reality.

Taking the history of the FA into consideration, in all likelihood the first year of the government will be a hopeful one for many. It will probably be a year of some changes, with others to be implemented later.

### **Voting and action**

We will find out if this rhythm of change in slow motion will be accepted by those millions who have been through the revolt since October 2019.

It is true that many social movements lost their rhythm after the November 15 agreement started to take hold. The year of restrictions on movement and the curfew under the Covid pandemic also had a real impact.

Perhaps these same movements will be fired into action with the arrival of "their" government. Perhaps they will take on independent life, or will wait and see what happens. We will find out what the real answers are to many questions, such as: How real was October? How was it possible that the millions who marched went back so soon to watching the telly and believing in parliamentary politics? Why didn't those millions talk *about how* to change the country themselves?

In many senses, Gabriel Boric is the most "reasonable" response to all these doubts. His government fills the gap left by the absence of

direct democracy and people power today. His government, in all probability, will celebrate popular democracy and social organisation while controlling it. That is the real meaning of "being responsible." It is the reality of parliamentary power, with all its associated negotiations and deals, but with the appearance of the promise of real changes.

However, the attention of the radical sections that flowered during the October uprising will be focussed on the constitutional convention, because they believe that Boric is already a lost cause. Indeed being on the "left" of the delegates to the constitutional convention means that you want to build direct, popular, people power different from parliamentary democracy.

Some of those who are more radical, inside and outside of the convention, recognise the relative weakness of social organisation, and are convinced that the social movements can be rebuilt during the public discussions of the details of the new constitution.

The radical delegates have to gain a two-thirds majority to include a section in the new constitution, and the fight over those votes is seen by many as a way to bring the social movements back to life.

The gap between practical activity in the run up to the October revolt and the concentration on "voting" today could be filled by new direct democracy. For example, the debate in the convention over public rights to water could be focussed by debating cutting off agro-industrial or mining pumps and pipelines, which feed mining processes and export orientated crops but leave whole communities without water.

Meanwhile, Boric and his government will be in command and can say that they'll "be able to make all the changes when the new constitution is installed and working."

His government will be a minority in the parliament, and their being blocked may make it appear that all the reasonableness they've called for has been a waste of time and effort. As such, Boric's government could widen its base inside the parliament to include other, more conservative sections. Or It could look for extra-parliamentary support and face the challenge of rebuilding the social movements.

For their part, the radicals with roots in the social movements will have to create politics that allow them to work and actively argue with that majority who have illusions in Gabriel Boric.

As for the armed organisations in the Mapuche region, they see the new constitution as just one more trick in the pack of lies and subterfuge that all governments have used against their people.