

The election of Michelle Bachelet represents a bold new era for Chile, writes **Eduardo Gallardo**

From out of left field

MICHELLE BACHELET is a socialist, an agnostic and a single mother — hardly the traditional profile for a leader of Chile, a conservative Catholic bastion in South America.

Her path to Chile's presidency has taken her from a dictator's jail cell to exile in East Germany and back home as a respected defence minister.

Her rise to power stunned many Chileans, who thought a socialist single mother jailed during General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship stood little chance in a conservative Catholic country where divorce is a touchy issue.

Yet Bachelet, 54, has become the country's first woman president after a run-off vote on Sunday for which her unconventional CV has been a major asset.

Bachelet is the candidate for the centre-left Concertacion, a coalition of leftist and centrist parties that has governed Chile since the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet ended in 1990.

Bachelet won 53% of the vote in Sunday's run-off, compared to 46% for Sebastian Pinera, a conservative wealthy businessman.

"Who would have said, 10, 15 years ago — that a woman would be elected president?" Bachelet asked thousands of supporters.

The elections underlined Latin America's tilt toward the left, though Bachelet has promised to maintain the free-market policies that have made Chile's economy one of the strongest in the region.

The 54-year-old paediatrician had expected resistance from Chile's conservative military establishment. "I was a woman, a divorcee, a socialist, an agnostic ... all possible sins together," she said recently.

But Bachelet plays down her past: "I am just a Chilean woman no more and no less than millions of other Chileans," Bachelet said. "I work, I take care of my home and I drop my daughter off at school. I'm also a Chilean that feels a calling to fight for justice and public service."

Colleagues say Bachelet is an workaholic who still manages to enjoy parties and dancing.

Bachelet is separated from her husband — divorce became legal in 2004 — and has three children from two different relationships.

Bachelet's father was an air force general arrested for opposing the 1973 coup that brought Pinochet to power. Alberto Bachelet died in prison of a heart attack, probably caused by torture, Bachelet says.

A 22-year-old medical student at the time, Bachelet was also arrested, along with her mother. They were blindfolded, beaten and denied food



Chile's new president Michelle Bachelet, with her daughter Francisca, thanks the people with all her heart for their support. She has vowed to maintain the country's free-market policies.

for five days while their cellmates were raped. She insists she harbours no rancour because she has "a political understanding of why those things happened".

They were forced into five years in exile, in Australia, then communist East Germany, where Bachelet married a fellow Chilean exile.

They later separated, and she had a third child from a new relationship. Bachelet, already the mother of a young son, Sebastian, returned to Chile in 1979 but was prevented

from practicing as a doctor by the dictatorship. She continued studying, specialising in paediatrics and public health. Then in 1984 she gave birth to a daughter, Francisca.

After returning to Chile, Bachelet worked underground with other leftist exiles, quietly advancing in the Socialist Party. She became a well-known figure in the centre-left coalition that has ruled since 1990.

Current President Ricardo Lagos, constitutionally barred from seeking

re-election, made her his health minister, then in 2002 named her defence minister. She won praise for helping heal divisions between civilians and military over from the dictatorship.

Bachelet became a popular figure among the admirals and generals, often responding to an officer's salute with a smile and a kiss.

Lagos and Bachelet belong to the same Socialist Party as Salvador Allende, whose leftist policies prompted Pinochet's bloody coup. But the

party allied with other major left-centre parties in 1990 to oust the right wing, and their coalition has held while leading Chile into a free-trade pact with the United States, cutting inflation and fostering growth of about 6% a year.

In spite of their different political backgrounds and ideologies, both Bachelet and Pinera outlined similar goals. Both said they would fight to lower the 8% unemployment rate, improve public health, housing and education and curb rising crime.

Bachelet, the third woman in Latin America to be directly elected president, will be inaugurated on March 11.

She indicated she would work with all the region's leaders. "They are presidents elected by their peoples. Chile must have relationships with all of them."

Her candidacy prompted questions about whether she would marry again. "I haven't had the time to even think about that. My next four years will be dedicated to work."

War, what war? Kurdistan is a haven of prosperity

IN ERBIL, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the huge citadel rises 30 metres above the bazaar, the myriad shops and bustling traffic. Erbil is 9,000 years old, the oldest permanently inhabited place in the world. But, soon it will have a taller neighbour than the citadel: a new shopping mall with hundreds of shops, topped by two office towers of 30 storeys each, financed by Lebanon-based Middle East Construction.

This is like a microcosm of the rise of Iraqi Kurdistan. While the media views Iraq through the casualty count of the suicide bomber, Erbil presents a different picture. Since October 2005 there are direct flights to Erbil from London, Stockholm, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Athens. Shops, measuring 12 square metres sold at €26,500 in August 2004 — and now fetch €49,500, more than a year before they open to customers.

Before reaching downtown Erbil, you enter the Christian suburb of Enkawa, and suddenly Dream City catches the eye, or rather, blocks the sky line. Behind high protective walls, €250m is being spent on 1,200 state of the art apartments (selling for between €125,000 and €536,000 each), schools, supermarkets and parks. The compound style walls are of course a mark of insecurity, and so is the speed at which the houses sell: rich Kurds like to spend on safety.

At the same time, Dream City — conceived of by a Kurd who made it in the West — is just one example of the confidence and energy that have turned Iraqi Kurdistan into a haven of prosperity in the last few years.

Foreign investors who were keen to join the initial Iraqi bonanza, back in 2003, now prefer to focus on the Kurdish North. With hardly any suicide bombers and no kidnappings, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) is the only major part of Iraq where foreigners feel more or less safe.

Roughly the size of the Irish Republic, the predominantly mountainous IKR has enjoyed self rule since 1991. To many of the five million inhabitants, Baghdad seems as far away

Iraq is seen through the prism of terrorism, but one region of the country is undergoing such a boom, it is spreading at a rate of one kilometre a year. **Michiel Hegener** reports

as Beijing, and many youngsters refuse to learn Arabic. There may be two regional governments (the result of bitter Kurdish infighting from 1994-97), but they are cooperating well these days. The president of one of them, Masoud Barzani, was received by President George W. Bush at the White House on Octo-

ber 25 and pledged his commitment to a full merger. He had to. The Americans appreciate being so popular in Northern Iraq — maybe more than anywhere in the World — but loathe the persisting split in the Kurdish ranks.

Towns are sprawling out over the surrounding countryside, land and

house prices are rocketing, and even in small villages, high up in the mountains, bricks, concrete and workers are in high demand.

The town of Zakho, in the north western tip of Iraqi Kurdistan, is growing towards the nearby Turkish border at a speed of a kilometre a year. Even before roads are properly paved, houses are built alongside them, apparently without interference from any planning authorities. The outskirts of Zakho look like the American West: dusty, rough, uncoordinated, but energetic.

"You do need permission to build a house here," asserts Hasheem Hamid, a GP at the Zakho General Hospital, "but you can easily get it after the house is completed."

Just two years ago he bought a delightful villa for himself, his wife Sabriah and their four children.

"I paid €41,000, now I could sell it for five times as much," he says. Permission may be easy to get, mortgages are unknown and all houses are being paid for in cash. Banks exist, but individuals avoid them.

In the town of Shaqlawa (which is 20% Christian), estate agent Paulus Abdul Selman reports that house prices have tripled in just one year. In Suleymania, IKR's second city, 48 Turkish and 30 Iranian firms operate, as do contractors from the Far East and Western Europe.

Even in the countryside, foreigners enjoy the opportunities the Kur-

dish economy has to offer. Against a backdrop of snow capped mountains and blazing autumn colours, a few dozen Pakistanis are setting up iron towers that will lead electricity lines to the remote Sidakan Valley near the Iranian and Turkish border.

To really see what Iraq without insurgents looks like, Erbil is the show case. A four-lane motorway to Salahuddin, the presidential headquarters 20 kilometres east of Erbil, has just been completed. Flyovers and building sites skirt the capital. Large but ordinary houses are built at top speed with ready-made concrete blocks. No double walls, no insulation. This is the time to go fast. The Kurds won't wait until the rest of Iraq gets its act together.



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