

CHILE - Human Rights Conspicuously Absent in Presidential Race (María Cecilia Espinosa, IPS)

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SANTIAGO, Dec 9 ([IPS](#)) - The absence of human rights issues in the campaign for Sunday's presidential elections in Chile is an "alarming" sign of the candidates' priorities, according to the executive director of the local chapter of Amnesty International, Sergio Laurenti.

The term of socialist President Ricardo Lagos, which ends Mar. 11, has been marked by a favourable environment for bringing to justice the perpetrators of crimes against humanity committed during the 1973-1990 dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, who is himself currently under house arrest and facing trial in several cases.

But "there is a broad range of issues involving economic, social and cultural rights that have been largely ignored by the government: for example, the rights of women and girls and the rights of indigenous peoples," which have not been taken into account by the presidential candidates either, Laurenti told IPS.

Some 8.3 million voters are registered to take part in the presidential and legislative elections in Chile on Sunday, the day after International Human Rights Day.

In an open letter, the local chapter of Amnesty International suggested that the four presidential candidates draft an agenda on basic rights as part of the preparations for the 200th anniversary of Chile's independence from Spain, to be celebrated on Sept. 18, 2010.

The frontrunner in the elections is the centre-left governing coalition candidate, socialist Michelle Bachelet, who will face off with right-wing candidates Sebastián Piñera and Joaquín Lavín, and Tomás Hirsch, who represents small leftist groupings that are not represented in Congress.

Only Hirsch, who represents the Together We Can pact formed by the Communist and Humanist parties and is expected to take only a small proportion of the vote, responded to Amnesty's call and met with the international human rights group.

"The other three candidates said they were too busy with their campaigns to talk about the drafting of an agenda on human rights for Chile," said Laurenti.

In the activist's view, Lagos has left pending issues to the government that will take office in March 2006, including "questions like the repeal of the amnesty law (decreed by Pinochet in 1978), the creation of an ombudsman's office, and guarantees of the passage of legislation that would effectively prevent discrimination in Chile."

Guaranteeing universal access to justice, health and education is another goal that was not achieved, he added.

"We hope the new president that Chile elects will actively participate in promoting the defence of human rights, based on the work of civil society organisations, and will take into consideration Amnesty's recommendations," said Laurenti.

Criticising the image of success projected by the Lagos administration based on its strong economic performance, the activist said "Not everything is about economic wellbeing or advances in free trade. There are also areas in which people should be put first."

On Dec. 6, Amnesty International Chile launched a campaign titled "They must talk about human rights", and began to distribute copies of the open letter to the candidates, urging Chileans to demand that they take a public stand on the issue.

"That would possibly have an effect on the second round (of presidential elections), but we thought it was necessary to do it today in order for people to understand who the candidates are and why they don't talk about human rights," said Laurenti.

Bachelet is not expected to capture the 50 percent of the ballots plus one vote needed to win outright on Sunday without going to a Jan. 15 runoff against one of the right-wing candidates.

In an interview with IPS, Felipe Salaberry, a legislator with the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), Lavín's party, and a member of the Commission on Human Rights, Nationality and Citizenship in the lower house of Congress, said human rights issues have not been resolved by the Lagos administration.

The reason, he said, is not a lack of will on the part of the government but rather "the blackmail and constant veto by socialist lawmakers, who have never agreed, even 30 years after the military coup, to move forward on legislative initiatives aimed at closing the wounds of the past."

Salaberry was referring to the defeated bills to close roughly 100 trials for crimes against humanity in exchange for information on the whereabouts of the remains of a thousand detained-disappeared and additional reparations for relatives of the victims of the Pinochet dictatorship.

He further lamented the persistence of a perspective "influenced only by the events of the past in the area of human rights, in circumstances in which we can never make any progress."

The UDI lawmaker said he hoped that "in future administrations and the coming generations, human rights discussions will not solely be based on what happened 30 years ago, but will also look towards the future."

For his part, Rolando Jiménez, president of the Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation (MOVILH), told IPS that "for the first time in the political history of Chile, presidential candidates have discussed the issue of sexual minorities and some of their rights - a significant qualitative change."

He added, however, that the candidates have made "only vague remarks that do not imply a concrete commitment to the demands of the organised homosexual community, and MOVILH in particular."

Jiménez has met with Piñera, the candidate for the right-wing National Renewal Party, who pledged to "maintain the backing that his sector has given to congressional bills against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation."

In the event that he is elected president, Piñera has promised "to develop legislation that will grant basic legal stability to de facto couples, irregardless of their gender composition, which will apply equally to gay and lesbian couples and to heterosexual couples who do not ascribe to the form of marriage regulated by the Civil Code."

In addition, this right-wing candidate "has rejected the orders from the Vatican prohibiting homosexuals from entering the priesthood," said Jiménez.

The activist also praised the decision announced by a part of the Chilean right to fully defend the rights of the country's minorities, because otherwise "they would have no prospect of participating in elections or the government."

One of the main gains made by the gay and lesbian movement, stressed Jiménez, is to have opened up a dialogue "that cuts across all political sectors regarding the need to promote a culture that does not discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and supports legislation on this issue."

But he added that the UDI, for its part, has introduced bills to prohibit same-sex marriages and stop gay and lesbian couples married abroad from adopting children in Chile, demands that the country's sexual minorities have not even made.

UDI legislators also opposed a bill "that would establish measures against discrimination and in favour of the right to life, which is violated every time homophobic hate crimes are committed, a bill that was approved by a majority in congress in May of this year," commented the MOVILH activist.

According to Jiménez, during the last debate among presidential candidates on Nov. 16, "the real Lavín was exposed, the mystic incapable of separating the political role he wants to play as president of the Chilean people and his own, legitimate scale of religious values" (as a member of the conservative Catholic organisation Opus Dei).

"Having a president like him would be an enormous step backwards for Chilean society," stated Jiménez, who called on the homosexual community "not to vote for presidential and congressional candidates who express this degree of unbridled homophobia."

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