

FOREIGN AFFAIRS EN ESPAÑOL

Michelle Bachelet: A Rendezvous With History

by Beatriz Manz

Michelle Bachelet is a person who has had a rendezvous with history. In 2006, she became not only the first woman elected president of Chile but also the first woman in the Americas to gain that post without a link to a husband. Underscoring her penchant for breaking barriers, two years earlier she had been named the first woman defense minister in the hemisphere. While breaking the “glass ceiling” of reaching the presidency was historic, her lasting legacy is governing with unusual skill and distinction.

How did Bachelet reach this point? She has had a passion to make a difference for a long time, first as a student activist and, later, as a pediatrician. Surprisingly, in retrospect, elected office, let alone the presidency, didn't appear to be a particular goal. When polls began to show high approval ratings for Bachelet's work as defense minister, however, her passion for constructive change moved her into the political arena. In a country many characterize as socially conservative, Michelle Bachelet defied all typical categorizations for a presidential candidate. She was a divorced, openly agnostic, pro-choice, single woman raising three children. But she was able to flatten these presumed roadblocks into speed bumps. Her compelling personality and her background certainly played a role. Bachelet was perceived as honest, open, likeable, empathetic, intelligent and having great charisma. Women especially could see her as “one of us.”

While these personal qualities were noted and appreciated, she likewise put forward an inspiring vision and a compelling political program. She built on the achievements of the Concertación — the center-left coalition that had governed for the previous 16 years — but she put her own distinctive imprint on her government. She emphasized that economic growth and social equity were not mutually exclusive but, in fact, deeply intertwined. Together they laid the basis not simply for a strong economy but also for a more just and vibrant democracy. And she displayed the energy, skill and indefatigable determination to move in that direction. As President Obama, among many other world leaders put it, “I find her one of the most

compelling leaders that we have, not just in the hemisphere but around the world.”

Her biography provided her with a broad perspective from a young age. Belonging to a military family, she moved frequently within Chile as she was growing up. Her father, Air Force General Alberto Bachelet, moved the family to the United States when he became attached to the Chilean embassy in Washington, D.C. Being in the United States as the 1960s began to unfold provided a window onto history. This was a period of emerging political and cultural change and growing social mobilization. The civil rights, student and antiwar movements were beginning to transform U.S. society, and the culture was headed in new directions. She was also taken with the music of that period, with singers like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. In late summer 1963, Martin Luther King delivered his inspiring “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial to hundreds of thousands of people, who in turn carried the message throughout the country. She returned to Chile in 1964 to finish her secondary education, excelling academically and becoming class president, a small harbinger of things to come. Comments in the high-school yearbook praise her as person with a “a strong and defined personality,” who was “respectful, adapted to the course and the school.” She was said to be perseverant and to “possess the traits that would allow her to triumph in her aspirations.” When she entered the university, she became active in the Socialist Youth.

Years of Exile, Return and the Beginning of Political Life

The brutal military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973 was profoundly tragic for Bachelet and her family. Her father opposed the coup and was arrested and tortured. He died in prison. Bachelet and her mother were detained, imprisoned and tortured. She eventually went into exile, first in Australia and then in East Germany. There, she studied medicine, becoming a pediatrician. When she was allowed to return to Chile, she focused her work and efforts on health issues.

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A Bachelet banner over the entrance to La Moneda.
(Photo by Daniel Álvarez Valenzuela.)



Photo by Gilles Bassignac/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

Michelle Bachelet (left) with her mother Angela Jeria.

President Ricardo Lagos tapped her to become health minister when he took office in 2000. She was given a daunting, if not impossible, assignment: fix the long-standing disarray in public health services within 100 days. She impressed her colleagues and detractors alike with her innovative approach, engagement and energy. While she narrowly missed the 100-day target, she had more than made her mark. President Lagos' selection of her as defense minister was a bold, path-breaking move and, for some, astonishing. Although she had been interested, even immersed, in military issues for some time, she was the first woman to hold that position in Chile and one of the few female defense ministers in the world. Within Chile, a person who had paid an incalculable price as a result of the coup would have control and authority over the troops and the generals.

Once again, she excelled and performed well beyond expectations. It became clear that she knew the institution and the needs of military families and was determined to look forward to a democratic future without forgetting the past. Seeing her in control of the military, leading the traditional national independence day parade and taking charge of a natural disaster in the south, Chileans began to see her both as a compassionate and effective

health promoter and also as a strong, no-nonsense defense minister. Thus, to many Chileans, this unusual combination of humanity and solid leadership in the toughest of circumstances began to recommend her as a potential president.

First Woman President

Bachelet's political rise was so meteoric that she made it appear effortless. That impression, however, was highly misleading. The road ahead was far from easy. The gender barriers didn't simply disappear, she had to dismantle them. During and after the campaign, she commented on the different expectations and standards that women face. For example, she would point out that if a male president got a bit teary-eyed and choked up, people would say: "Oh, how good to have a president who is sensitive." But, were she to do the same, people would cry: "Oh, she is a hysteric! She can't control her emotions." She would also mention that journalists would ask her: "Tell me, do you have to take your children to a psychiatrist?" a question it is hard to imagine being asked of a male candidate, let alone a president.

In the first political debate with three other candidates — all male — Bachelet did very well. Polls,

in fact, indicated that viewers thought she came out on top. Newspaper articles the next day commented on her confidence and competence. She was both calm and forceful and, as a result, consolidated her frontrunner position. She embraced innovative, at times audacious, ideas, ranging from pension reforms to Latin American economic integration, especially in infrastructure and energy. Regarding the United States, she looked toward a constructive relationship but indicated that she would maintain the Lagos administration position against the war in Iraq. Bachelet emphasized that poverty, inequality and the resulting social instability were fundamental issues that needed to be addressed not only in Chile but also more generally in Latin America. She avoided easy solutions and emphasized tackling the issues vital to Chile's future. As she would later say, she wanted programs that would be popular without a false populism. As the campaign concluded, her candor, charm, intelligence and leadership fused into a message that inspired. She built on the strong political leadership that preceded her and put forward a set of programs emphasizing economic growth and social inclusion.

When Michelle Bachelet put on the presidential sash, she faced high expectations and a rocky beginning. All political transitions at this level tend to be difficult, and in her case, because she was a historic figure — the first woman president — there were many ready to term any stumble a “historic failure.” She faced daunting problems almost immediately ranging from student demonstrations to a meltdown in the new urban transportation system — the Transantiago — which affected about one-third of the country's population. The flaws in the design, planning and implementation of the system all flowed into outsized political problems for the new president, despite the fact that the issues preceded her term. Nevertheless, instead of celebrating her first anniversary, some commentators termed the crisis the most severe that the Concertación had faced and began writing her political obituary. Others ascribed any shake-ups in the cabinet — customary in any new administration — to the fact that a woman president had appointed women as half her ministers. In some cases, inexperience was an issue, but that can be a problem regardless of gender. Complicating the situation was a new structural constraint that, for the first time, Chile's

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Michelle Bachelet inspects a submarine as Chile's Defense Minister, 2003.



Photo by Mychele Danaou/Getty Images.

presidential term was going to be four years rather than the traditional six.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of Michelle Bachelet's political death proved to be greatly exaggerated. Even skeptics began to concede that "la Presidenta" could show extraordinary resolve, resilience and intelligence in addressing the toughest of issues. She didn't shirk blame, she sought to solve problems. She had a new leadership style and had promised new faces in the cabinet, giving gender parity and creating a *gobierno ciudadano* (citizen's government). She wanted to create a "more-inclusive society" and began moving effectively in that direction.

Her Presidency Takes Off: The Most Popular President in Chile's History

From the second year forward, conditions started to improve, and Chileans began to embrace Bachelet's leadership style: gentle and accessible yet also strong and determined. She embraced markets but understood that, for markets to work effectively, the state had to play an important role; she realized that strong economic growth was vital but that social inclusion would fuel that growth, not hold it back. Her values were firm, but her style was pragmatic. Poverty levels that stood at 40 percent when the Concertación took power in 1990 were down to 13 percent by the time she left office — the culmination of two decades of economic progress — and extreme poverty was reduced from 20 percent to 3 percent. She also delivered on her promise of social protection and gender equity: housewives would get pension benefits, and the poor would be protected from "cradle to old age."

Bachelet clearly saw the challenges that Chile faced in the global economy and wanted to lay the basis for her country to prosper rather than stagnate or even decline. As part of a broad set of counter-cyclical policies, Bachelet set aside windfall copper revenues from the commodities boom — a move that was far from popular at the time. Many observers had endless, at times even worthwhile, priorities on which to spend that money, but Bachelet insisted on saving the surplus for a rainy day. When the economic thunderstorms flooded many countries throughout the world in 2009 — far sooner than most had foreseen — Chile was able to increase its social spending by 7.8 percent, just at the moment when those funds were socially vital and economically critical.

Another visionary program Bachelet instituted was Becas Chile, which has allowed thousands of Chilean students to pursue graduate degrees in universities around the world. She was also the driving force behind the reestablishment of the Chile-California agreement, which

was started in 1963 and suspended after the military coup a decade later. This new relationship will once again promote technical cooperation between Chile and California in areas such as agriculture, education, renewable energy, water resource management and highway transportation. During Bachelet's term, troubled relations with Chile's neighbors, especially with Bolivia, were improved. As a goodwill gesture, she invited President Evo Morales to her inauguration. At the end of her term, Morales publically thanked Bachelet for her advice and friendship, saying that he had learned much from her. She also often thought in terms of Latin America and the Caribbean as a region, viewing economic links as essential. For her, the larger regional whole was potentially less volatile and, in fact, greater than the sum of its parts. Interdependence could be the foundation for economic strength, not a sign of weakness. Central to her vision was the notion that opportunities and aspirations should be available to all, not just the privileged few.

While Bachelet's vision was focused on the future, she was determined not to forget the past. In January 2010, she inaugurated the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos. Located in a broad, open plaza, visitors walk past the articles of the International Declaration of Human Rights inscribed on one wall. At the entrance to the museum are the words of Michelle Bachelet: "*No podemos cambiar nuestro pasado, solo nos queda aprender de lo vivido, esta es nuestra responsabilidad y nuestro desafío.*" (We cannot change our past, we can only learn from what we experience in life, this is our responsibility and our challenge.) Inside the modern building, one engages the legacy of the coup and the 17-year dictatorship. In March 2012, the Museum displayed 37 paintings and drawings from Fernando Botero's critically-acclaimed Abu Ghraib series on loan from the University of California, Berkeley.

Despite an uncertain start followed by a sputtering global economy, Chileans expressed feelings of optimism about the direction of the country by wide margins. And while Bachelet's term was short, Chileans overwhelmingly viewed her as an effective president. Her poll numbers soared past 84 percent approval ratings when she left office, a new record. What even these poll numbers don't fully convey is the passion with which people embraced her. Less scientific, but perhaps as important, is the reception she receives walking down the street or sitting in a café in Santiago. Strangers often emotionally express their gratitude for what they achieved under her presidency and for that intangible hope in the future that she inspired. But, as she would be the first to admit, social inequalities remain, especially in education and economic access.



Photo by Cristóbal Palma.

Chile's Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos.

However, that is the challenge going forward, not the end of the story.

Dialoga, the foundation Bachelet created soon after stepping down as president, aims at impacting Chilean society with fresh ideas. Its objectives are to contribute to social and political thinking and to promote leadership and dialogue. While the foundation organizes meetings, panels, roundtable discussion and workshops, it remains practically unknown, even in Santiago. Like many foundations in Chile, it does not have much resonance or presence so far. The impact is yet to be felt.

Executive Director, UN Women

Bachelet's new position as the founding director of a mega United Nations agency, UN Women, puts her on a global stage. When she accepted the position in September 2010, she understood that it was an enormous undertaking. While it's clear to many women's rights advocates that, as Bachelet has often stated, women's empowerment and gender equality provide the shortest route to addressing the toughest global problems, it can nonetheless be a complicated path. She affirms that women and girls have vast untapped potential but understands that unleashing their potential means removing many entrenched constraints.

Her own life experience and unique vantage point — from exile to former president — provides her the confidence that the future holds great possibilities for women and society. Ever optimistic, she inspires with her words and her example. While remaining conscious of universal issues confronting women, there are, of course, regional realities and differences. Added to these are the bureaucratic hurdles faced by a global organization like the UN. A key challenge for UN Women is forging gender equality and female empowerment in a way that allows women to improve their lives and define their futures. This challenge means addressing and respecting cultural, social and religious differences, while seeking meaningful change. It requires cultural sensitivity, humanity, political skills and determination — all qualities that Michelle Bachelet has amply demonstrated.

UN Women confronts the enduring discrimination faced by women around the globe: gender gaps in education, employment, salary and security among other long-standing, seemingly intractable issues. Women tend to hold more economically vulnerable and marginalized jobs and are more likely to be relegated to poverty and poor health. There are also recurring snags with maternity leave, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Women suffer directly, but the entire society loses in the process.

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Profound gender inequalities are hardly something Michelle Bachelet can solve during her term as head of UN Women. But, when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wisely tapped her for the position, he knew the unique qualities that she would bring. She understood that the deplorable position of women was an issue of justice and equality and that bold, serious action needed to be taken. He understood that she could inspire and make things happen; he saw the ways in which she exercised strong leadership and sought consensus, unusual skills that could breathe life into UN Women. The result could help millions of women and girls throughout the world to improve their lives.

“Women’s rights are human rights,” as then-first lady Hillary Clinton famously proclaimed at the United Nations Women’s conference in Beijing, on September 5, 1995. “It is time to break our silence,” she said, “...it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights.” Despite her stirring call for action, it took many years to create UN Women, the most important organization dedicated to women’s rights worldwide.

Often people ask what Michelle Bachelet is like when she is not on stage. What is she like when she is not fulfilling the role of president or head of UN Women? The simple answer may be that she is comfortable and unpretentious. Her humanity is at the heart of her being, and people tend to recognize and relate to that special quality. A case

in point is her most recent visit to the Berkeley campus in April 2011. She was clearly at ease and enjoyed being around both students and faculty. She could also be disarmingly irreverent. Her spirit and personality showed when, at a public talk, a student asked her: “When you get free time to relax, what do you do?” (The moderator had mentioned that she was only briefly in Berkeley between a trip to Nigeria and an early flight to Panama the next day.) She repeated: “Free time?” and then smiled and paused, almost as if to reflect on the meaning of that concept, while the public laughed. “Not much,” she continued. “I have to do laundry. I may be a former president, but I am a normal person, and I have to do everything you have to do.” What the future will hold for former president Michelle Bachelet is an enigmatic question. It is obvious that she has great stamina and a desire to affect change. The United Nations position has given her a new banner and a new focus for her acute sensibilities and skills. Whatever she chooses to do, the world will likely be a better place as a result.

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Michelle Bachelet and Hillary Rodham Clinton at a high-level UN meeting for women political leaders, 2011.



Photo courtesy of UN Women.