
Latin America, Another Turn to the Right

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A Pinochet admirer, son of former Nazis, and vehemently opposed to women's rights, this radical figure close to Javier Milei has just led Chile to the far right. Photo: ElGrandContinent

Javier Milei and Marco Rubio, beaming with pride, were the first to congratulate José Antonio Kast on his resounding victory in Sunday's presidential elections in Chile, which paves the way for the first far-right government since the end of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship 35 years ago.

"Under his leadership, we are confident that Chile will advance on shared priorities, including strengthening public safety, ending illegal immigration, and revitalizing our trade relationship. The United States looks forward to working closely with his administration to deepen our partnership and promote shared prosperity in our hemisphere," said the Trump-aligned foreign minister.

Chile is not an exception in the region. Kast's victory is part of a series of elections in Latin America that have ousted incumbent governments and propelled right-wing leaders to power, from Argentina to Bolivia, in a context where US President Donald Trump seeks to reaffirm Washington's influence in the Western Hemisphere, reviving the Monroe Doctrine, punishing rivals, and supporting allies.

However, Kast does not want to be compared to either Trump or Milei, stating that his government, which he described as an emergency, is something else entirely. He asked his supporters to respect his communist opponent, Jeannette Jara, and emphasized that he will combat crime and illegal immigration.

But no matter how hard he tries to avoid comparisons with other right-wing governments on the continent, his past works against him.

Born to German parents, his father was a Nazi sympathizer, and Kast was a prominent figure who supported Pinochet. During his dictatorship, he tried to prevent his legacy from disappearing, riddled with unspeakable crimes.

He formed his own party, arguing that he was still the same person, that he hadn't changed, and that it was the traditional right-wing parties that had moderated their stance.

An admirer of El Salvador's Nayib Bukele and Italy's Giorgia Meloni, Kast differs from other far-right leaders in the region in his style, which is much less disruptive and aggressive than that of Donald Trump or Javier Milei, although some attendees at his rallies wear hats with the Trumpian slogan "MAGA."

As in other countries where the far right is very strong, Kast—who also has connections with VOX in Spain—has strengthened the traditional Chilean right, united in the Chile Vamos coalition, and has become its leader.

The big question is what kind of government he will form starting in March and whether he will be guided by his most radical supporters or seek to align himself with the traditional right wing of the Chile Vamos coalition to build consensus in a Parliament without a majority.

Regarding security, he has cited the aforementioned Bukele as a role model, whose mega-prison for 40,000 inmates he visited last year. He plans to build new maximum-security prisons, toughen prison conditions, and sever criminal gangs' contact with the outside world.

He also proposes expanding the powers of the Army and the Police, as well as strengthening legal protections for officers who use force. On immigration policy, he has adopted a tone similar to Trump's: mass deportations of undocumented immigrants and the construction of a barrier on the northern border, with trenches up to three meters deep.

On the economic front, he promises to cut \$6 billion in public spending in just 18 months by reducing state employment and eliminating ministries, without touching social benefits—a goal many economists consider difficult to achieve.

Kast maintains that reducing corporate taxes and bureaucracy will return Chile to the era of rapid growth of the 1990s, when the country established itself as the region's economic model.

WHY WILL HE WIN?

Kast is a devout Catholic and the father of nine children. His moral conservatism, which includes staunch opposition to abortion without exceptions and same-sex marriage, has drawn comparisons to former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, now imprisoned, and was a hindrance in his two previous failed attempts to reach La Moneda (the presidential palace).

This time, however, the rise in irregular immigration and the advance of organized crime during Boric's presidency dominated the electoral agenda and fueled support for a hardline security discourse.

The "forced voter," as citizens who didn't usually participate in elections when voting was voluntary are called, largely favored Kast.

Forty percent of them had never voted before and were socialized at the ballot box for the first time, voting for the right wing, whose hope is that this new political cycle will be long-lasting and allow them to govern for several terms.

Unlike other elections, in which the debate centered on the cost of living and public services, the conversation turned to the high perception of insecurity and policies on irregular immigration, in a country historically unaccustomed to receiving waves of immigrants from abroad. The ruling party struggled to address this debate because it implies a shift in positions expressed just a few years ago. Although Jara tried, with visits to the border and promises of increased police presence, the hardline approach never quite worked.

The former Minister of Labor also failed to unify the center-left alliance or win over the middle class. Jara defended social gains and warned of the potential impact of the fiscal adjustment promised by Kast, but he failed to place these risks at the center of the debate. He essentially lost touch with the working class and segments of the middle class, as happened with the left in other parts of the world.

The foundation of Kast's historic victory lay in the effectiveness of his fear-mongering rhetoric, portraying a country

losing its identity. Even people on the right acknowledge that the country isn't falling apart, as Kast tried to convince them in order to justify the need for urgent solutions, but his message resonated deeply.

Kast received the support of Johannes Kaiser and Evelyn Matthei, right-wing candidates who were eliminated in the first round. But the overwhelming percentage he achieved in the second round even surpassed the combined total of the three of them in November, and he won in every region of the country. It's the second largest margin in a runoff election, only behind the 24 points that Michelle Bachelet achieved over Matthei in 2013, and it will be the first time since the end of Pinochet dictatorship that the right-wing bloc has the largest minority in both houses of Congress or, this leaves Kast with a good margin of governability for his first months. The ruling coalition already holds half the seats in the Senate and only needs to add two deputies from Franco Parisi's People's Party to achieve a quorum in the Chamber of Deputies.

In short, José Antonio Kast, an ultra-Catholic, expressed, following his election, that "my first thanks go to my family. I also want to thank God." This is how the president-elect summarized the foundation of his ideology: religion, country, and family: "Nothing would be possible without God, and that's something we cannot fail to recognize. For people of faith, nothing happens without God."
