

Chile's new leader to stay the course [CL] ^[1]

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Michelle Bachelet, the first woman to be elected president in South America, wasn't one to hog the gender milestone yesterday.

"Some say I'm the first female president in South America, but I am not so sure. We can say first woman elected in this century, of this we can be completely sure," the president-elect said.

Ms. Bachelet, a 54-year-old Socialist, swept to victory Sunday evening as the candidate of the centre-left ruling coalition, in power since General Augusto Pinochet was forced to step down in 1990. She won with 53.5 per cent of the votes, seven points ahead of her rival Sebastian Pinera, a conservative billionaire businessman.

While Ms. Bachelet, a pediatrician who served as health minister and defence minister in the previous government, did not mention Canada, the country was one of a handful listed in her campaign literature as sharing not only Chile's commercial interests, but also its human values and democratic orientation.

She pledged to pay special attention to the bilateral and multilateral relationships with these preferred countries: Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, Sweden and Norway -- but notably not the United States.

Canada is Chile's third-largest foreign investor, with \$6.5-billion (Canadian) in direct foreign investment in 2004. Canada leads in the mining sector. Two-way trade reached \$1-billion in 2004, compared with \$415-million between Canada and Chile's neighbour, Argentina.

"Chile feels more politically connected to countries with the same international and multilateral approach, such as Canada and the Nordic countries," explained Tomas Jocelyn-Holt, a Bachelet aide after the press conference.

Ms. Bachelet, an agnostic and single mother of three children from two different men, was imprisoned under the Pinochet dictatorship, and her victory is seen as a symbol of healing and change in a conservative country that has become increasingly secular.

At her victory rally Sunday, young women with tattoos and pierced cheeks stood side-by-side with grandmothers and fathers carrying their babies on their shoulders, all celebrating a new era for Chile.

Among Ms. Bachelet's promises have been daycare for poor working mothers, universal access to kindergarten and a reform of the private pension system.

Vibrant and charismatic, Ms. Bachelet has also benefited from the tremendous popularity of outgoing President Ricardo Lagos, who is credited with bringing Chile out of a 1999 recession. Her challenge will be to deliver on her many promises, including the appointment of women to half of her cabinet posts.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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