
Will Chile's dark history be eclipsed by a brighter future?

Author: Lesley Stone

For travellers with a taste for history and a curiosity about the future, this is an ideal time to visit Chile.

This long and skinny Latin American country is potentially facing a vastly different future, with its new young president Gabriel Boric promising social reforms, equality and long-overdue answers to the brutal secrets of its past.

The mood carries a delicious frisson of excitement with a sense of buoyant optimism as the new government promises to reinvent the country as an equal, just and prosperous place for all. But these winds of change are giving some people nervous shivers.

To a casual visitor, or a newly-arrived expat like me, there is little in Chile that needs fixing. The streets are largely safe and lively, full of small shops and vendors hawking their goods; buskers entertaining the pedestrians; a brilliant public transport system; reliable electricity supply; and cheap broadband internet access. What a pleasure! Scratch a little deeper and the past emerges. Santiago's Museum of Memory and Human Rights is a good starting point. The first time I visited five years ago, I was moved to tears by a display dedicated to a few of the people who 'disappeared' during the 17-year dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. A woman showed me the pipe that one young student used to smoke, and the faded photographs of other victims. Sometimes the friends and family did find out what had happened, she said, showing me the bullet-riddled suit one man was wearing when he was assassinated by the national army.

Pinochet's right-wing regime left more than 3,000 people dead or missing, 27,255 tortured and an estimated 200,000 driven into exile. Since the population was only 7 million at the time, that eliminated a lot of voices.

Even the pretty streets in the central district of Paris-Londres are punctuated by the past, with plaques among the cobblestones outside Londres 38, a building where prisoners were tortured by the security police. Its displays include a row of posters showing the faces of young women who never made it past their twenties.

This grim background is partly what's fueling the emotions, the hopes and the trepidation swirling through Chile today. The new president, Gabriel Boric, was once a young student protest leader, and he's risen from rebel leader to hold the highest office at just 36 years old.

Some people fear that he will lead this country scarred by a right-wing dictator too far to the left and destroy the economy. The coup by Pinochet was designed to end the Marxist reforms of the previous president, Salvador Allende, whose policies such as nationalising many businesses had provoked an economic catastrophe.

Chileans will vote on September 4 on whether to approve or reject a new constitution to replace the one imposed by Pinochet. The initial proposal to draft a new constitution was supported by 78 percent of voters, since most people want change - but not if it hurts too much. An elite capitalist minority doesn't want change at all, and the views have polarised into vocal groups campaigning to either reject or approve the new constitution.

It's not just the elite who fear that Boric will lead Chile into an extreme form of socialism. A young Venezuelan that I met at a language meet-up doesn't support Boric at all - as an economic migrant he sees worrying similarities between Chile's far left and the disasters playing out in Venezuela.

Chilean film and television writer Alejandro Venegas says the country is poised at a pivotal moment. "We have never had a president like this before - idealistic and young and wanting to bring changes in a more impactful way. Some people think this guy is going to destroy the economy and others think he's going to bring a better quality of life for everybody," he says.

“It’s uncertain but also very exciting, and there’s a hopefulness.”

Venegas voted for Boric in the elections that brought him to power, but far from idolises him. “I think he’s probably going to make some great changes for society and he’s probably going to mess up some things. In terms of civil liberties, freedom, acceptance and tolerance, it feels like things are going to be very positive.”

Venegas says people expect Boric to push for radical shifts such as better wages and benefits, and more rights for immigrants and indigenous people, causing some to fear that the economy will be unable to support this largesse. Many older people who grew up in a conservative era believe he’s too young and inexperienced, Venegas adds. “A lot of them are very stuck in the past with traditional ideas that hinder progress.”

Under Pinochet the pendulum swung and education, healthcare, pensions and state-owned companies were all privatised. After democracy was restored in 1990 Chile stabilised and prospered, but the policies didn’t change and inequality escalated.

By 2019 Chile had almost reached the bottom of the World Inequality Report, with one per cent of the country’s population holding 27 percent of its income. Rumbling discontent flared into widespread protests in 2019 triggered by the rising cost of public transport. The protests ballooned, with demonstrations drawing up to a million people demanding reforms of every kind.

Today, Boric is promising a slew of social benefits including job creation, better funded national healthcare, higher pensions, and the cancellation of student debt. But his ideals face huge challenges, since his union of coalition parties are a minority in parliament, so passing any laws will require the support of his rivals.

The proposed new Constitution will be a strong starting point – if it gets accepted. It has already been reviewed and toned down ahead of the national vote, after serious opposition to many of its proposals. Now concerted campaigns to influence voters are being conducted by parties and vested interests on both sides of the political and social spectrum, and fake news is rife.

Writing in the English language newspaper Chile Today, commentator Germán Silva Cuadra predicted that a large percentage of people who are still undecided will support the new constitution. Although they might disagree with parts of it, they don’t support the far-right, “which wants to maintain the Pinochet Constitution and opposed the new one from the start,” he wrote.

One of my language students is a 32-year-old doctor, who I expected to firmly favour the reforms. His conservative attitude surprised me. Although he voted for the idea of a new constitution, he views the current draft with trepidation. It swings too far towards socialism and also gives too much power to the president, he says. “This new constitution does not represent me. I don’t like this president and I didn’t vote for him, he represents the very extreme left,” he says. “They want to protect production and increase social benefits, but this type of communism doesn’t work in Latin America. The new president and his politicians have similar thoughts to the extreme left in Venezuela, which is contrary to capitalism and a productive economy,” he says.

Analysts fear that if this attempt to introduce a new constitution fails, it will be disastrous for Boric’s government. It could revive his opponents on both the far right and the hard left, and Chile’s opportunity to finally take measured steps towards equality and prosperity for all could falter.

Meanwhile, as a newcomer who has visited several sites of the brutal past, it’s disturbing to know how much damage could be caused by extremism in either direction. And a fascinating time to be here.