

World

Pinochet casts long shadow over Chile vote

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Workers carry electoral material as polling stations are set up at the National stadium in Santiago, on November 17, 2017, ahead of the upcoming general elections on November 19. / AFP PHOTO / Martin BERNETTI



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He's been dead for 11 years, but Augusto Pinochet still casts a long shadow over Sunday's presidential election in conservative Chile, where the right is set to reclaim power.

Despite his iron-fisted regime being responsible for some 3,200 dead or missing, 12 percent of Chileans still consider the military dictator one of the "best leaders" in the country's history, according to a recent poll.

Center-right billionaire businessman Sebastian Pinera has a clear lead going into Sunday's first round vote, but will probably have to rely on some support from the hard right to prevail in a run-off next month.

The emergence during the campaign of ultraconservative MP Jose Antonio Kast, who has no qualms about professing his admiration for Pinochet, has forced Pinera to the right.

The businessman toughened up his rhetoric to the point that shouts of "Viva Pinochet" rang out during some of his rallies.

Even though its political heft has declined over the years, "Pinochetismo" remains a reality in Chile, and is still able to wield influence in the country's largest party, the Independent Democratic Union (UDI).

It's a weapon Pinera can't easily afford to ignore.

"Pinera is not a pinochetist, but he needs pinochetismo," said Raul Elgueta, an analyst from the University of Santiago.

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In a largely unopposed election campaign, Kast broke a taboo with a speech lauding Pinochet's rule, saying he was vehemently opposed to abortion and immigration, and called for a relaxing of gun laws to allow citizens to defend themselves.

Kast managed to momentarily grab the media spotlight with his direct views during the campaign — including that he wouldn't hesitate to shoot if he discovered a burglar in his home — though his party only holds around three percent support.

“In the second round, everyone should vote for Pinera, and Pinera should adopt more moderate positions to win. Pinochetism is dead, or very marginal,” said Patricio Navia of New York University.

– Right revived? –

And yet, much of Chilean society continues to value Pinochet's political and economic legacy.

Twenty-seven years after the end of his dictatorship, the free-market economic system that he established remains almost intact, as does the private pension system and the constitution that he backed in 1980.

The electoral system he introduced — and which has long favored the right — has been dismantled by the Bachelet government, which also wants to reform Chile's elitist education system.

Forced to swing his electoral campaign more to the right, Pinera temporarily gave up the idea of casting himself as the leader of a political right wing free of Pinochet's legacy.

Until now, he had always sought to distance himself. In 1988, he voted against Pinochet remaining in power in the referendum that precipitated the fall of the regime.

Then, during his previous tenure as president from 2010-14, he accused some of the right of harboring “passive accomplices” of the dictatorship.

He also made a landmark decision to shut down a special prison for perpetrators of crimes against human rights.

Pinochet's regime fell after the 1988 referendum, but the former dictator still headed the army for eight years, before becoming a senator until 2001.

He died of a heart attack in December 2006, without ever having been convicted.

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