

## International

# Chile's Pinera: The president defeated by social upheaval

## Attempts to calm protests against social injustice were at best clumsy

**SANTIAGO:** Chile's President Sebastian Pinera modernized the political right to distance it from the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, but a social crisis that broke out in 2019 will see him leave power with his popularity in tatters. The billionaire leader, 71, who cannot stand for reelection in Sunday's voting, has served two non-consecutive mandates. His second term, which ends in March, has been beset by numerous problems, not least the coronavirus pandemic.

But he has also had to deal with a social uprising, accusations of graft and an impeachment bid that was quashed on Tuesday by the Senate. "The morning after the social outbreak was the end of the Pinera government politically and in terms of influence," elections analyst Axel Callis told AFP. Pinera's early attempts to calm protests against social injustice were at best clumsy. A rich businessman seen as the embodiment of the country's economic, political and institutional injustices, Pinera's martial tone and early decision to deploy the military proved disastrous.

Not long beforehand, he had described Chile as an "oasis" in Latin America due to its robust economy and political stability. Two weeks later, two million Chileans took to the streets demanding change to the country's neo-liberal model. The unprecedented protests convinced parliament to agree to hold a referendum on changing the country's dictatorship-era constitution - and a year later the people voted overwhelmingly (78 percent) in favor of change.

Pinera, who failed to either propose or support the move, again appeared out of touch with the people he governed. "What happened was a change in the axis of power," said Callis. "In one way or another, a parliamentary system was installed, without the corresponding institutionality - Chile is a presidential system - and everything in terms of relevant politics started happening in parliament." The executive found itself confined to the back benches and Pinera "ceased to be a valued, strategic or significant actor."

### Popularity plunge

The pandemic could not have hit at a worse time. While Chile can pride itself on its rapid vaccine roll-out - 90 percent of those eligible amongst the 19 million population are fully immunized - the government's procrastination in distributing aid prevented Pinera from regaining the people's trust. Even less so his implication in the Pandora Papers, suspected of a conflict of interests over the sale of a mine by members of his family to a close friend, and completed in a tax haven.

While the Senate blocked opposition attempts to impeach Pinera, he remains the subject of a graft investigation. With five months left of his term, Pinera's popularity has plunged to its lowest level at 12 percent, compared to 50 percent when he ended his first term in 2014. In 2010, the Harvard-educated economist con-



**SANTIAGO:** Chilean President Sebastian Pinera and his wife Cecilia Morel arrive for a press conference at La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago on November 17, 2021. — AFP

vinced the electorate that his personal success in business - according to Forbes in 2018, Pinera was worth \$2.8 billion - could be transferred to the benefit of society.

He managed to bring back to power a revamped right-wing that had rid itself of the baggage of being associated with Pinochet's dictatorship. During his first term he branded

civilian defenders of the dictatorship as "passive accomplices" and closed a special jail set up for human rights abusers. "Pinera wanted to represent a modern, democratic right-wing," Claudia Heiss, a professor of political sciences at the University of Chile said. "He wanted to definitively end the transition" to democracy and "end the divisions that came from the dictatorship." — AFP

## US, Gulf accuse Iran of causing 'nuclear crisis'

**WASHINGTON:** The United States and its Arab allies in the Gulf accused Iran Wednesday of causing a nuclear crisis and destabilizing the Middle East with ballistic missiles and drones. The warning came in a joint statement issued after a meeting of the US and Gulf Cooperation Council working group on Iran, which was held in Saudi Arabia.

"All participants urged the new Iranian administration to seize the current diplomatic opportunity" stemming from the resumption of talks in Vienna aimed at salvaging the Iranian nuclear accord, and "prevent conflict and crisis," the statement said. These indirect talks between the US and Iran were suspended after Iran elected a new president in June and are now scheduled to resume late this month.

They are aimed at resurrecting the 2015 multinational accord aimed at preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The US under then president Donald Trump pulled out of the accord in 2018, and in response

Iran has abandoned many of the commitments it made under that agreement to curb its nuclear program. "Iran has taken steps for which it has no civilian need but that would be important to a nuclear weapons program," said the statement from representatives of the US, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

These countries also condemned what they called "a range of aggressive and dangerous Iranian policies including the proliferation and direct use of advanced ballistic missiles" and drones. "Iran's support to armed militias across the region and its ballistic missile program pose a clear threat to regional security and stability," the statement said. Some Gulf countries such as Qatar and Oman are often seen as channels for the US to communicate with Iran.

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy fiercely opposed to Shiite Iran, has also recently undertaken a quiet but noticeable dialogue with its neighbor under the auspices of Iraq. These Gulf countries "briefed" Washington on "their efforts to build effective diplomatic channels with Iran" in order to ease tensions, albeit with the support of American military dissuasion. "The US and GCC member states stressed that these diplomatic efforts will not succeed if Iran continues to provoke a nuclear crisis," the statement concluded. — AFP

## US cars mandated to spot drunk drivers and stop them

**WASHINGTON:** Breath-sniffing sensors and finger-scanning detectors are central to a landmark US safety mandate to fight drunk driving that is spurring tough questions about what technology can be trusted to do. The federal law, which will require new cars to spot intoxicated drivers in coming years, could save thousands of lives annually with the potential to expand abroad, advocates say. Yet the legislation signed into law this week by President Joe Biden has also left skeptics to question whether vehicles could refuse to operate due to a false positive or effectively become witnesses against their owners in criminal cases.

Ultimately it is up to American regulators to decide what could become international precedent-setting rules. They have not said much so far, but have a potentially extendable three years to work with. The initial reaction though was euphoria for people who battle against alcohol-related crashes in the United States, which permits drivers to have a higher level of booze in their blood than many other developed nations and consistently records a death toll over 10,000 per year. "I'm crying tears of joy today," said Alex Otte, national president of

anti-drunk-driving advocacy group MADD.

"This is the beginning of the end of drunk driving," she wrote in a statement after Biden's law signing ceremony Monday at the White House. The devil is in the details of course, and one of the best options for fielding functional technology to meet the mandate has been under development since 2008 in a collaboration between carmakers and regulators. As part of the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS), researchers have developed tiny vent-like sensors that draw in a driver's exhaled breath and test it.

Or the driver pushes the ignition button, which measures blood alcohol levels under the skin's surface by shining an infrared-light through the person's fingertip. Anti-cheat functions are built into the system, which could prevent the car from starting or keep it from moving for drivers over the .08 percent blood alcohol limit in most US states, said Robert Strassburger, president of the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety (ACTS), which is supported by carmakers.

The DADSS initiative is a partnership between ACTS and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which did not respond to a request for comment. "We all emit carbon dioxide as we exhale and as long as you are in a range of CO2, then we know that sample was coming from the driver and nowhere else," Strassburger told AFP. As for the touch system, by pressing the ignition button the driver would complete what is effectively a circuit between their seat and the system. — AFP