

## International

# A tale of two Chiles: Polar opposite candidates vie for presidency

## Kast proposes digging a border 'trench' to keep out illegal immigrants

**SANTIAGO:** Two political outsiders with polar opposite views and policies will go head-to-head in a runoff election next month to become Chile's president after trouncing candidates from traditional parties in a first round Sunday.

Who are they?

### Far-right

On the far right is lawyer and ex-MP Jose Antonio Kast, 55, an outspoken admirer of Chile's former dictator Augusto Pinochet and of his neoliberal economic model that has boosted private enterprise, critics say at the expense of the poor and working classes.

Kast, leader of the Republican Party he founded in 2019, has expressed kinship with other conservative leaders such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump in the United States and Spain's far-right Vox party. This is his second presidential contest—in 2017, as an independent, he made it to fourth place with less than eight percent of the vote.

Married and a father to nine children, Kast is an active member of the Schoenstatt conservative Catholic movement. He is against gay marriage and abortion. Kast hails from German immigrants who moved to Santiago in 1951 and became wealthy from sausage production and a restaurant chain. His economic model proposes reducing public spending, cutting taxes, and trimming the number of ministries, including that of women's affairs.

He would like to retain Chile's system of private pensions, one of the main gripes of protesters who took to the streets in October 2019 to denounce

Chile's deep-rooted social inequality. Kast has promised to restore order in a time of great political uncertainty, with many Chileans fearful of immigration and crime, and angry about violence and arson committed by some of the anti-government protesters.

He has proposed digging a border "trench" to keep out illegal immigrants, particularly from Venezuela. "Kast represents the most recalcitrant of the Chilean right, which continues... to be a core of Pinochetism, authoritarianism and xenophobia," Claudia Heiss, a professor of political science at the University of Chile, told AFP. "Sometimes fear is a

greater mobilizer than hope," added Mauricio Morales, a political analyst at Talca university.

### Left

## Gabriel Boric promises a welfare state

At 35, leftist lawmaker Gabriel Boric is Chile's youngest-ever presidential hopeful—only just meeting the required minimum age to participate. The former student activist leader is riding a wave of public support for a more progressive social system.

As the candidate for the Approve Dignity coalition that includes the left-wing Frente Amplio (Broad Front) and the Communist Party, Boric has vowed to relegate Chile's neoliberal economic policies, widely seen as sidelining the poor and working classes, "to the grave."

He has also promised "a welfare state so that everyone has the same rights no matter how much money they have in their wallet." Chile has one of the highest per capita incomes in Latin America, and one of the highest concentrations of multimillionaires but also "persistently high inequality" between rich



**PUNTA ARENAS, Chile:** Chilean presidential candidate, Gabriel Boric, from the Apruebo Dignidad party, greets supporters in Providencia, Santiago following the first results of the general election. —AFP

and poor, according to a recent OECD report.

The middle class is heavily indebted, often to pay for schooling, healthcare and private pensions. Boric, who is unmarried and hails from Punta Arenas in Chile's south, backed the 2019 anti-government protests that resulted in a process to rewrite Chile's dictatorship-era constitution. In 2011, he led student protests for free schooling in one of the most expensive countries for education in the world.

His detractors say Boric is inexperienced in poli-

tics and are suspicious of his allegiance to communists. But supporters say his lack of ties to the ruling elite, which is increasingly viewed with hostility, counts in his favor.

Boric, of Croatian and Catalan descent, has abandoned the long hair of his activist days, seeking to build a more consensual and moderate image. But he shuns ties and makes no attempt to hide his tattoos. He supports gay marriage and abortion rights. —AFP

## On the scrap heap: Syria's 'horrific' child labor

**AL-BAB:** Syria's decade-long conflict forced 15-year-old Mohammad Makhzoum out of the classroom and into a scrapyard, where the orphan works 12 hours a day to support his younger siblings. Mohammad, who has been working since he was nine, leaves home every day at dawn for a basic foundry where he helps melt metal amid thick and toxic black fumes. He said he wanted to make sure his sister and two brothers avoid a fate that has beset so many of Syria's children.

"I am their mother and father," he said, his face covered in soot, speaking from the run-down scrapyard in the northern city of Al-Bab. "I work so that they can continue their studies, because... they shouldn't be denied an education like I was." An estimated 2.5 million children in Syria are out of school, with another 1.6 million at risk of dropping out, according to the UN's children agency UNICEF. It estimates that nine in ten children in Syria live in poverty and more than 5,700 children - some as young as seven - have been recruited to fight.

### Worsening situation

There is no official data in Syria on child labor rates. But they are believed to have steadily increased throughout the course of the conflict, with the coronavirus pandemic and an economic crisis fuelling further spikes over the past year. "It is evident that child labor has increased in Syria...because of Covid-19 and the worsening economic crisis," UNICEF spokesperson Juliette Touma said.

"Children in Syria, when they are involved in labor, are exposed to conditions that are absolutely horrific," she said. Mohammad, who originally hails from the town of Maarat Al-Numan in Idlib district, dropped out of school at the age of nine to support his family after his father was killed by artillery shells fired by government forces. Two years ago, his mother was killed during a battle between rebels and regime forces in the same area.

He fled with his siblings to Al-Bab, where they live in a small bullet-riddled flat, furnished with nothing but thin foam mattresses. His weekly income of five dollars barely covers their food needs, but Mohammad still manages to source enough for his siblings' school supplies. "I work for their sake... I like to see them comfortable," he said. "I want to see them become doctors or teachers, without having to suffer like I had to." But few of Syria's children currently stand a chance of getting a decent life.

### 'War destroyed our dreams'

At a makeshift oil refinery in al-Bab, 12-year-old Amer Al-Shayban knelt in the freezing mud as he packed handfuls of charcoal in a plastic bag. Then he dragged the heavy bag - nearly half his size - to feed a furnace that emits toxic fumes. "I am forced to work... it's not in my hands," Amer said, explaining that he is the main breadwinner for his family. "I work summers and winters in the refinery to support my parents... my chest hurts regularly because of the smoke and fumes."

When Amer finishes his shift, he washes off soot from his hands and walks to a nearby displacement camp, where he lives with his parents and five younger siblings. His father suffers from diabetes and clogged arteries, leaving the family mostly reliant on Amer's monthly income of five dollars. "I dream of carrying a pen and a notebook and going to school," he said. "That is better than the furnaces, the diesel and this smell."

Nadim al-Nako, aged 12, has given up hope of ever returning to school, after he dropped out two years ago. Nadim works with a blowtorch most of the day - without any safety goggles - in his father's workshop to make pots and pans. His salary goes entirely to household expenses, he said. "War destroyed our dreams," he said. —AFP

## Egypt using French military aid to 'kill civilians'

**PARIS:** Egypt has used intelligence supplied by the French military to target and "kill civilians" suspected of smuggling, according to a report Sunday by investigative website Disclose, based on leaked documents. Opposition deputies immediately called for a parliamentary committee to be set up to investigate the affair, while Defence Minister Florence Parly ordered her own investigation.

"Sirli", the name of the mission between the two countries, was designed to provide intelligence on the jihadist threat along Egypt's western border with Libya, Disclose said. "In principle, the mission... consisted of searching the Western Desert to find possible terrorist threats coming from Libya," using a light aircraft designed for surveillance and reconnaissance, it said.

## Le Pen facing biggest test as French far-right splinters

**MARSEILLE:** On a tour of a fine-food trade show, surrounded by cheese and truffles, French far-right leader Marine Le Pen admits that the start of campaigning for next year's presidential election has given her indigestion. "It's been Zemmour for breakfast, lunch and dinner," she complained to AFP after more than an hour and half of sampling everything from throat-burning alcoholic liqueurs to duck-liver pate.

Eric Zemmour, a media pundit and best-selling author whose rhetoric on Muslims and immigrants is more extreme than Le Pen's, has made a dramatic entrance into French politics since September. "It's been incredible. The way he has monopolised the media is absolutely extraordinary," she said during a weekend trip to the southern port of Marseille. For the first time in early October, polls showed Le Pen failing to qualify for the second round of next April's polls, eclipsed by her new rival whose face was on TV screens and newspaper stands around the country. "When you've got experience you have to let the dust settle and the dust is starting to settle," the 53-year-old said confidently, forecasting that Zemmour's support would be temporary while hers was permanent.

Three separate polls in the last 10 days indicate Zemmour, who has yet to officially declare his candidacy, is indeed losing steam. But the outcome of the duel remains uncertain and observers are unsure how it might affect the final result of an election which President Emmanuel Macron remains the favourite to win.

One possibility is that Le Pen and Zemmour eliminate each other by splitting the far-right vote in the first round

## Iran says hopes for constructive visit by IAEA chief

**TEHRAN:** Iran said yesterday it hoped a visit by the chief of the UN's atomic watchdog would be "constructive", just days ahead of the resumption of talks seeking to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy

Agency (IAEA), was to arrive in Tehran late yesterday. He was expected to meet Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Atomic Energy Organization Chief Mohammad Eslami, who is also one of Iran's vice presidents. "We hope that Rafael Grossi's visit will be as constructive as the previous ones," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told reporters.

"We have always advised the IAEA to stay on the path of technical cooperation, and to not let certain countries pursue their political orientations on behalf of the IAEA." On Friday, the IAEA said Tehran had again increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium, many times in excess of the limit laid down in the 2015 agreement. Grossi's visit comes as Iran readies for talks with world powers in

### Calls for inquiries

Operation Sirli began in February 2016 during the presidency of Francois Hollande. It continued despite the reservations expressed by both French military intelligence (DRM) and the airforce about the way Egypt was using the intelligence, said Disclose.

One such note was addressed to French Defence Minister Florence Parly on January 22, 2019, before French President Emmanuel Macron's official visit to Egypt. The French military was nevertheless still deployed in the Egyptian, Disclose reported.

Neither the French presidency nor any of the arms

of the military responded to an approach from the journalists who carried out the investigation. Within hours of the story's publication, a statement from France's defence ministry confirmed that the two countries had arrangements in the field of intelligence and counter-terrorism.

For security reasons however, they were not prepared to say any more on the matter. The statement added that Defence Minister Florence Parly had asked for an investigation to be launched into the information revealed by Disclose. The left-wing opposition France Unbowed party issued a statement calling for a parliamentary inquiry into the allegations.

The party called for Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who served as defence minister during the Hollande presidency, to come before parliament to explain what was going on.

Although France has expressed a desire to refocus its arms exports on Europe, Egypt remains one of its main clients. Its sales there increased considerably when President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power in 2014. Since then, Egypt has bought France's Rafale fighter aircraft, a frigate, four corvettes and two Mistral helicopter-carriers. —AFP



**MARSEILLE:** Leader of French far-right party Rassemblement National (RN) and candidate for the 2022 French presidential election Marine Le Pen (C) answers journalists' questions after visiting a police station in the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille. —AFP

on April 10. The latest tracker poll last Thursday by OpinionWay showed Macron top on 24-25 percent. Le Pen comfortably in second on 19-21 percent, with Zemmour trailing on 12 percent. Under France's electoral system, the two candidates who get the most votes in the first round advance to a run-off ballot. Le Pen is convinced that Zemmour will expand the far-right nationalist vote for the second round by attracting traditional right-wing voters who are angry about immigration and crime, as well as abstentionists. "For the people who've supported Zemmour's candidacy, it will be much easier for this

electorate to switch to me," she explained, adding that Zemmour "might end up being a stroke of luck". Success in what is her third tilt for one of Europe's most powerful political offices would send shockwaves across the continent. Zemmour has already helped Le Pen with one of her main goals since she took over the National Front party, now known as the National Rally, from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2011. The divorced mother-of-three has been desperate to portray herself as a more moderate figure and has excluded overt racists and anti-Semites—including her father—from her movement. —AFP

Vienna on November 29 on saving Tehran's 2015 deal with major powers, that promised it sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear programme.

"We will leave for Vienna with a full team and a serious will to lift the sanctions," Khatibzadeh said. "The other parties should also try to come to Vienna to reach a practical and comprehensive agreement."

The landmark deal was torpedoed in 2018 by then US president Donald Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw Washington from it and impose a punishing sanctions regime. Iran has since stepped away from many of its commitments, but the administration of US President Joe Biden has advocated a return to diplomacy to save the agreement. —AFP