

11:09 06 Dec RTRS-FEATURE-Chile vote tests centrists' loyalty to government

By Tiffany Woods

ROSARIO, Chile (Reuters) - Chilean farmer Bernardito Arena swishes his sandaled foot in the muddy irrigation ditch and leans on his shovel.

"(President Eduardo) Frei has not done anything for anyone," said Arena, who earns less than \$6 a day and has spent most of his 64 years tilling the land "from sunup to sundown" near this roadside town 70 miles (110 km) south of Santiago.

"Unfortunately, I voted for him (in 1993)," he said. "Now I am going to vote for (Joaquin) Lavin."

Analysts say Chile's Arenas -- traditional center-oriented Christian Democrat (DC) voters -- could hold the key in the Dec. 12 presidential election to whether the ruling center-left Concertacion coalition continues a decade-long hold on power.

For the first time since its founding in 1957, the DC has no presidential candidate. Its traditional supporters must decide whether to cast ballots for right-wing Lavin or Socialist Ricardo Lagos, who is part of the coalition with the DC. Dissatisfaction with Frei's six-year, make-no-waves government may cause some votes to go to Lavin, analysts say.

DC VOTE 'ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL'

The DC vote is "absolutely crucial because the left does not have a majority," said Carlos Huneeus, head of pollster Cerc.

According to a September-October poll by the Center for Public Studies (CEP), 67 percent of DC supporters said they would vote for Lagos and 19 percent gave their vote to Lavin. This means about 30 percent of DC supporters have decided to vote for a candidate other than Lagos or cast a blank ballot or they have not yet decided how to vote.

"This may be the decisive factor," said Andres Passicot, general manager of pollster Gemines. "All that is necessary for this to be a tight election is that this 30 percent does not vote (for Lagos). Either of the two (Lagos or Lavin) can win."

Most of these DC supporters will vote for Lagos because he is part of the coalition, said Marta Lagos, general manager of pollster Mori, who is not related to Ricardo Lagos. "Those people who have been Christian Democrats will vote for the Concertacion," she said. "(The DC vote) is not a campaign issue. There is no one who crosses the street."

She has not met Enrique Correa, a farmer like Arena, who said: "All my life I have been a Christian Democrat. Now, in this election. I am going to change candidates."

Taking a break from plowing with his horse near Villa Alegre in central Chile, Correa, 47, said he will give Lavin his vote because he does not want a Socialist running the country. His vote will cancel out that of Pedro Munoz, 29, who farms tobacco near the town of Cumpeo in central Chile.

"I voted for Frei before. Now I will vote for Lagos," Munoz said, explaining that he is faithful to the Concertacion.

DETERIORATION AND DISSATISFACTION

The building that houses the DC's national headquarters in Santiago sums up its status: run-down but being refurbished. Looking more like a small-town campaign office of a cash-strapped minor party, it hardly seems fitting for the party headquarters of the man who runs the country.

Mix-and-match second-hand office furniture and sad-looking plants fill the otherwise bare space. A hammer pounds in the background and salsa music plays from a construction worker's radio. The office is downsizing from three floors to two.

"We have to adjust the party to reality. This means changing the building. We need to be more humble," said Moises Valenzuela, who oversees the DC's network in Chile's regions.

The DC suffered a decline in popularity this decade to the point where it lost the primary election in May, which would have given it the opportunity to present a candidate for president. In the primary, people not registered with non-coalition parties selected Lagos over DC candidate Andres Zaldivar to represent the coalition in December's election.

The DC got 29 percent of the vote in 1992 municipal elections nationwide, 24.7 percent in 1993 elections for lower house members and 18.9 percent in 1997 lower house elections. Now polls say it would get only 15 percent, Marta Lagos said.

"I don't think this is a trend that can be reversed. People are leaving the party," she said.

Some have stopped voting for the DC because they were fed up with its failure to act on its beliefs, Valenzuela said. "Our problem was how to transform these beliefs into concrete programs," he said.

Coming off a 17-year dictatorship that ended in 1990, the DC has spent much of the decade sitting on the fence, trying not to step on the toes of the military or the powerful business community. President Frei, for example, manages to deliver bland, 10-page speeches, frustrating reporters who struggle to find a newsworthy angle.

Part of the DC's role was precisely to be quiet and steer the country through the so-called "transition to democracy," Valenzuela said, adding that the party paid a price for this.

"The people have been clear in saying to us: 'Look, Mr. Christian Democrat, if you are not capable of changing we are not going to continue supporting you,'" he said.

Since it lost the primaries, the party has decentralized and drawn up a concrete political agenda including health care and equality in an attempt to regain its popularity. With the next presidential elections after December's not for another six years, it has the time to try to win back voters.

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