

GROUPON



BOTAS
Hasta 70% off*

Ver Ofertas

*Oferta referencial

[NYTimes.com](#) Go to a Section

[Advertise on NYTimes.com](#)

[Log In - Register Now](#)

SEARCH

NYT Since 1981

Search

[International Home](#)

[Africa](#)

[Americas](#)

[Asia Pacific](#)

[Europe](#)

[Middle East](#)

Chile's Socialist President Exits Enjoying Wide Respect

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)

Published: March 11, 2006

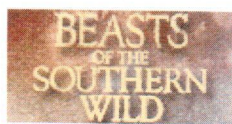
SANTIAGO, [Chile](#), March 10 — Ricardo Lagos Escobar barely squeaked into office six years ago, winning just a hair over half of the vote in a hard-fought runoff. On Saturday, though, he will step down as president of Chile with three-quarters of the population saying they approve of his performance, according to recent opinion surveys.

[Sign In to E-Mail This](#)

[Printer-Friendly](#)

[Reprints](#)

[Save Article](#)



Alex Ibanez/Presidential Palace, via Associated Press

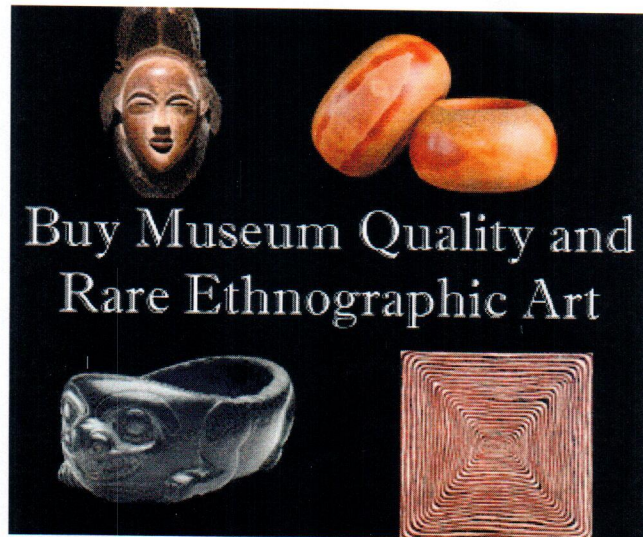
President Ricardo Lagos says farewell on Thursday to government employees at the presidential palace in Santiago, Chile.

As the first Socialist to govern Chile since Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#) overthrew Salvador Allende in 1973, Mr. Lagos took office carrying a historic burden. But by combining cautious economic policies with advances in social equality and human rights, he has built a level of respect that cuts across class and generational lines, from conservative businessmen to the rock fans who gave him an ovation when his presence was announced at a U2 concert here two weeks ago.

In a survey of 20 prominent Chilean historians, political scientists and other academics

published last weekend in the conservative newspaper El

Advertisement



Buy Museum Quality and Rare Ethnographic Art

[Advertise on NYTimes.com](#)

Most E-Mailed Articles [The New York Times](#)

Past 24 Hours | [Past 7 Days](#)

1. [Well: Attention Disorders Can Take a Toll on Marriage](#)
2. [Prone to Error: Earliest Steps to Find Cancer](#)
3. [Adventures in Very Recent Evolution](#)
4. [Many States Adopt National Standards for Their Schools](#)
5. [Recipes for Health: Spicy Quinoa, Cucumber and Tomato Salad](#)

[Go to Complete List](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS



Introducing Business Day Live - Watch Now!

Mercurio, one of his most incessant critics, Mr. Lagos's presidency was ranked the best of the 30 the country has had since 1900.

Mr. Allende, who died in the American-supported military coup against him, was next to last on the list, while General Pinochet was in a tie for 10th place.

"This country is much better off now than when Lagos first came in, both in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction," said Patricio Navia, a professor at the Diego Portales University here and at [New York University](#) who took part in the survey.

Successful, stable governments are hardly the rule in this part of the world, and for a president to leave office more popular than when he entered is even more unusual. During Mr. Lagos's tenure, for example, two neighboring countries, Argentina and Bolivia, have each had six different presidents, at least two of whom were toppled by popular uprisings.

During an interview, Mr. Lagos, 68, an economist who earned a doctorate at [Duke University](#), said that when he came to power after a decade in which the country was led by Christian Democrats, both the business class and "the military sectors were quite suspicious." He viewed his task, he said, as one of "dispersing ghosts" from the past and gaining the confidence of skeptics.

Though still not popular with the far right or his own left flank, which considers him too timid, Mr. Lagos calmed the powerful business elite by continuing the main economic policies of his predecessors: pursuing budget surpluses and programs to stimulate exports. But with copper prices at a record high and the economy growing faster than any other in South America, he could also afford to let the military acquire new weapons while investing in health, education and housing programs for the poor.

In the foreword to a recently published collection of Mr. Lagos's essays, speeches and interviews, called "The 21st Century: A View from the South," Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) of Britain praises Mr. Lagos for demonstrating "how the values inherited from socialism can be applied in a 21st-century society."

The most concrete indicator of Mr. Lagos's success in soothing the initial fears that he might be a replay of Mr. Allende is that he will transfer power on Saturday to another Socialist, Michelle Bachelet. She is the first woman to be elected president of a Latin American country who was not the widow of a political leader, and Mr. Lagos says he promoted her ascent in part as a way of showing the rest of the world that its perception of Chile

was out of date.

"In 2002 it was still thought, especially abroad, that Pinochet was running things," he explained. "I was tired of explaining that Pinochet wasn't in charge." When he moved Ms. Bachelet from health minister to defense minister, he said, "nobody complained — nobody said anything."

Mr. Lagos also addressed Chile's painful past by creating a commission to investigate and report on torture during the Pinochet years and by persuading the military to acknowledge its responsibility for those abuses. He has also allowed the judicial system to prosecute General Pinochet, giving specially appointed investigative judges the money and the independence they need to do so.

"We have had many differences with him, but in retrospect, during the Lagos administration Chile has made the most impressive progress on human rights issues as well as justice reform and freedom of expression," said José Miguel Vivanco, a Chilean lawyer who is director of Human Rights Watch Americas.

Mr. Lagos's term has also been marked by major social changes like the legalization of divorce and the end of film censorship. "In general, the transition agenda is coming to an end," the president said in the interview. "A few elements of healing wounds still remain, yes, but those will close with time."

Despite Mr. Lagos's Socialist origins, his government struck trade agreements with the United States and the [European Union](#), among others. Since the accord with Washington went into effect in 2004, Chilean exports to the United States have increased nearly 80 percent and American exports to Chile have climbed 90 percent.

Politically, though, there have been a few rocky moments in relations with the United States, most notably when Chile was a member of the [United Nations](#) Security Council in 2003 and opposed the Bush administration's plan to invade Iraq.

But he won Washington's gratitude the following year by taking on, with Brazil, the leadership of a Latin American peacekeeping mission in Haiti, sparing the Bush administration the political and military cost of direct involvement there while its forces have their hands full in Iraq.

"We have had an outstanding relationship with President Lagos," Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) told Latin American reporters in Washington on Thursday, just before flying here for

Ms. Bachelet's inauguration. "I think he has been not just a great president for Chile, but he's been really a wise and strong force for democracy and for free economies throughout the region."

On a continent where President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela gets most of the attention, Mr. Lagos is valuable to the United States because he "embodies the other left, the successful left," said Arturo Valenzuela, who was director of Latin American affairs at the National Security Council during the Clinton administration. "It's not like he is a Socialist in sheep's clothing; he has actually done a lot in the way of social programs."

[More Articles in International >](#)

Ads by Google what's this?

[Cupones de Descuentos](#)

Regístrate Gratis, Descubre Cupones

con Dto desde 50% y Disfruta ¡Aquí!

[PezUrbano.c/Descuentos](#)

RELATED ARTICLES

[Chile's Socialist President Exits Enjoying Wide Respect](#) (March 11, 2006)

[Andes Deaths Are Another Black Eye for Chile's Military](#) (May 23, 2005)

[Chilean Judge Says Pinochet Is Fit for Trial](#) (December 14, 2004)

[World Briefing | Americas: Chile: Payment For Torture Victims](#) (November 30, 2004)

RELATED SEARCHES

[Chile](#) | [Lagos, Ricardo](#) | [Politics and Government](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



[Charles Taylor's Rise and Fall](#)



[The Ghost in the Baghdad Museum](#)



[Making of a Toddler Supergroup](#)



[Digital Composer](#)



[Nationalist Politics in Peru](#)