

Chilean President-Elect Ricardo Lagos

HEALING THE OPEN WOUNDS

By CRISTOBAL EDWARDS SANTIAGO

TIME: What will be your government's priorities?

Lagos: The first priority is economic growth. We want Chile's economy to grow at a rate of 7% to 8% annually. This year it's going to grow by 6%. Second, we want growth to have a positive impact on the poorest people. In the past 10 years, Chile's gross domestic product has doubled, but income distribution continues to be as unequal as before. Third, Chile has an unfinished task: we have a constitution [written under Pinochet and approved in a 1980 referendum] with which not all Chileans agree. Amending it depends on the conservatives, who hold the majority in Congress.

TIME: What will complete Chile's transition to democracy?

Lagos: When there is a constitution that represents everyone. In the history of Chile, we have never faced a situation in which there is a supreme law that incorporates such unrepresentative elements [as unelected Senators]. It's iniquitable.

TIME: Will you seek an agreement with the opposition to amend the constitution?

Lagos: If possible, but until now the opposition has refused such agreements.

TIME: The conservatives seem stronger after their showing in the election. How will you deal with them?

Lagos: During the campaign, the opposition claimed that there weren't significant differences between our programs. That's why I invited them to participate in a joint working group. If there is common ground, I think we should move on it. If there are conflicting views, let's discuss them. That's what democracy is all about.

TIME: What common issues do you think Congress could work on?

Lagos: Access to higher education, reform in health services and creating more opportunities for young people.

TIME: What role will your government

take in the investigation of past human-rights abuses?

Lagos: Chile has had material and spiritual progress over the past two decades, but this remains an open wound for many Chileans. In order to close that wound, we need truth and justice. I'll do everything that one can do to promote the truth. Justice is up to the courts. My role as President is to make sure that the courts' work is not obstructed.

TIME: Will your government get involved in the 57 criminal suits that have been filed against General Pinochet?

Lagos: I'd have to evaluate the situation.

TIME: What kind of relation do you hope to have with the armed forces? Some officers view you with mistrust.

Lagos: Well, I understand that. I have a political and moral opinion about Pinochet's rule. I opposed him. I was even arrested and imprisoned for a few days. I hold no hatred. I desire no vengeance. As a Minister of Education and of Public Works, I worked with members of the armed forces. As President, I also hope to work with the armed forces.

TIME: To work closely with them?

Lagos: Whatever is necessary for the undertaking of my duties as well as those of the armed forces. What must be avoided is for them to be treated as a political issue, because that's totally against their function. They have the monopoly over weapons, and so it should be, but it's up to the civil authorities to decide when and how those weapons are used.

TIME: You are the first Socialist President since Salvador Allende Gossens. Will your government be haunted by his ghost and his overthrow in 1973?



EMILIANO THIBAUT—CORBIS SYGMA FOR TIME

Lagos: Chile in the 1970s and Chile in the 2000s are very different places. I was elected by a different coalition than his. That does not mean that I don't respect Allende, or that I have stopped grieving for my friends who died back then.

TIME: You've said that you'd like Chile to become a full member of Mercosur. Do you want to push that?

Lagos: Yes. I recognize that it's not easy.

TIME: What about NAFTA or a free-trade agreement with the U.S.?

Lagos: I'd say that the ball is in the U.S. court. Chile is open to a free-trade agreement, but I understand that in an election year, it's difficult for the U.S. Congress to grant fast-track authority.

TIME: What kind of country would you like Chile to be at the end of your term?

Lagos: By 2010, when Chile celebrates its bicentennial, I'd like to see a country where Chileans are not afraid of getting sick because there's a public health system that works; are not afraid of losing their job because there's unemployment insurance; are not worried about how they will put their kids through college because there's a good scholarship program; and are not afraid of growing old because pensions are good. ■