



POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

Michelle Bachelet: Physician, Military Strategist, Head of State

By Karen Calabria



Chile's President Michelle Bachelet, left, and U.S. President Barack Obama talk in the White House Oval Office in Washington, in June, 2014. President Obama spoke of the "excellent relationship" with Chile and its importance to the United States. President Bachelet encouraged increased cooperation in education, energy science, technology and commerce. © AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin

Courage, commitment and circumstance propelled this physician-turned-politician into becoming the first woman president of Chile – and helped her return to office four years later.

Self-professed agnostic. Divorced mother of three. Amateur folk-singer. Pediatrician.

That's an unlikely recipe for political success in a country as devoutly religious and socially conservative as Chile, but Michelle Bachelet has never shied away from contradictions. If anything, she has created her legacy from them.

In her first attempt to win Chile's

highest political office, she emerged from the race as the country's first democratically elected female president.

"We've opened the windows and doors to let ordinary people in, to encourage them to participate," Bachelet told the *New York Times*, reflecting on the reasons she won the Chilean presidency in 2006, an office she held through 2010. Four years later she was re-elected to the 2014-2018

term, becoming the first president to return to office since 1952. (Chile's constitution does not allow a president to serve consecutive terms.)

When she left office in 2010, Bachelet's approval rating was 84 percent. She secured more than 60 percent of the vote in her 2013 presidential bid. Reiterating her campaign promises of education and tax reforms in her second inaugural speech, she also underscored her lifelong commitment:



President Bachelet, second from right, speaks with a family affected by the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Constitucion, Chile. © Claudio Santana/AFP/Getty Images

“Chile has only one great adversary: inequality. And only together we’ll be able to defeat it,” she said.

Pursuing a Passion for Equality

A former political prisoner who turned to public service, Bachelet worked to establish a stable democracy during the transition from the brutal military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. She’s a physician — an epidemiologist and pediatrician — and a military strategist, having studied military science at the National Academy for Strategic and

Policy Studies in Chile and at the Inter-American Defense College in Washington.

Following her first term as president, Bachelet was appointed the first head of U.N. Women at the United Nations, where she worked to foster international gender equality. In her last speech to the Commission on the Status of Women before returning to Chile to run for president in 2013, Bachelet said, “We have all the evidence to know that progress for peace that is lasting, and for development that is sustainable, depends

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on ... the long overdue progress for the women and girls of this world.”

She credits her upbringing for her belief in equality. “In my family, I learned that all people should be equal in opportunities, and that justice was essential, dignity was essential. So it is in my DNA to believe in peoples’ rights and to believe we are all different and that it is great because that makes this world more interesting,” she said in an interview with Barbara Crossette that appeared in *The Nation*.

Those ideals experienced their first — and most trying — test during

the 1973 ouster of then-President Salvador Allende by military strongman Pinochet. Her father, an Air Force general with a prominent position in Allende’s government, was taken into military custody for treason. He was tortured, and subsequently died from a heart attack as a result.

Bachelet didn’t let this deter her own political participation, stepping up her commitment as a member of the Socialist Youth Movement. But her activities were curtailed when both she and her mother, Ángela Jeria Gómez, were detained at torture centers by the Pinochet regime before they fled the

country for Australia in 1975.

Promoting Tolerance and Understanding

“Because I was a victim of hate, I’ve consecrated my life to turning hate into understanding, tolerance and, why not say it — love,” she said in her victory speech after the 2006 presidential election.

Bachelet’s lifelong focus has been to address inequities. As Chile’s minister of health, which she became in 2000, under President Ricardo Lagos, she improved access to public health care. In 2002 she



Supporters of Michelle Bachelet attend her campaign rally in Santiago, Chile, in November, 2013. © AP Images

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was the first woman in Latin America to be appointed defense minister. During her tenure she promoted reconciliation between the military and civilian society, modernizing the Chilean military.

Her career as a physician led to her appointment as health minister. Her father's military background inspired her to pursue military studies, which prepared her for the role of defense minister.

"I noticed that one of the barriers to full democracy was the [lack] of understanding between the military world and the civilian world. They spoke different languages," she told the Guardian. "I wanted to help with that. I could be a bridge between those two worlds."

At U.N. Women, Bachelet recognized that raising the status of women around the world is no small task. She told U.N. Radio shortly after her appointment as head of the then-new U.N. agency, "In many regions of the world, women



Chile's presidential candidate Michelle Bachelet, right, and rival Evelyn Matthei, smile for photographers before their television debate in Santiago, Chile, December, 2013. © AP Images

don't have the same opportunities as men regarding the most essential human rights; women are discriminated [against], their rights are violated. There are still some places where women are mutilated. And so I am convinced that we need to work very hard to improve their condition, and I know it's ... very challenging work."

Despite her successes, Bachelet is no stranger to criticism. Shortly after she took office in 2014, demonstrations

education, tax policies and other issues relating to wealth distribution. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Chile had one of the widest gaps between rich and poor in the world in 2014. Similar issues dogged her during her first term as president.

Focused on the Future

Bachelet said she remains as committed to her vision of a better future as the youthful idealist that stood up to the same oppressive regime that had killed her father.

As she told the New York Times, "What I am mostly interested in, what I remain committed to, is less dwelling on the past than creating a better future."

This is excerpted from the book Women in the World Today, published by the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.

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Michelle Bachelet on her way to La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago, Chile, to be sworn in as Chile's president for the second time on March 11, 2014. © AP Images