[Khalid Bhatti](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/khalid-bhatti)

June 14, 2021

**Democracy in Chile**

Finally, people in Chile have given a clear mandate to the constituent assembly to change the 1980 constitution imposed by the vicious military dictatorship of General Pinochet.

The Chilean electorate handed down a shocking defeat to the rightwing elite in the constituent assembly elections held in May 2021. This is the biggest political defeat for the rightwing ruling elite since the ouster of Gen Pinochet from power in 1990.

Chile’s political Right was punished by voters for defending the Pinochet era constitution for decades. The rightwing parties failed to secure one-third of the seats to block the radical changes in the constitution. The turnout in the election was around 43.32 percent, as some 6.45 million voters out of 14 million went to polling stations.

The people of Chile have imposed their trust in young, progressive and independent representatives so they can rewrite the constitution. Left-leaning candidates and independents have won a more than two-thirds majority in the 155-member constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

It is an important step towards realising a democratic, progressive and egalitarian constitution representing the democratic will and aspirations of the Chilean people.

The challenge before the delegates now is not only to democratise the state apparatus and ensure full democratic, political and economic rights and freedoms but also to democratise the economy. The new constitution should be based on the principles of participatory democracy and the economic empowerment of the working masses so that it contributes to the well-being of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The rightwing parties have 37 seats in the Chilean parliament, 14 seats less to gain the one-third needed to have the veto power. The radical left coalition bagged 28 seats, while the centre-left won 25 seats. Thus, the left and center-left altogether has 53 seats, 16 more than the right and center-right together.

The real surprise of this election has been the victory of independents in big numbers; they have won 48 seats. Most of these independents are left-leaning and progressive, including trade union leaders, social activists and feminists, who emerged on the political scene during the mass protest movement of 2019. Some of them are doctors, scientists and entrepreneurs belonging to the middle class.

This is truly a new beginning for Chilean democracy. The Chilean left, progressives, working people, students, indigenous people and radical intellectuals struggled for nearly 40 years to make this happen.

The mass protest movement in 2019 mainly by young people forced the rightwing Chilean government to organise the referendum in October 2020 to get approval for the constituent assembly elections. A hike in transport fares triggered the massive protest movement in 2019. The government of rightwing president Sebastian Pinera tried to suppress the protest movement by using repressive measures in which 36 people died. The movement was centred on three main issues: the rising cost of living, an end to neoliberal economic policies, and rewriting the Pinochet-era constitution.

The people want to change the Pinochet-era constitution because it protects the neoliberal economic model in Chile, which Gen Pinochet developed during his military rule from 1973 to 1990.

Chile was the first country in the world where neoliberal free market economic policies were implemented. A private sector led development model was established. The Chilean state has been considered one of the most pro-neoliberal and market friendly in the world.

As a political legacy, Pinochet left behind a constitution in 1990 in which the role of the state was reduced to a bare minimum in economic activity and in the redistribution of wealth. Since then, education, health, pensions have been almost completely privatized while public services like energy, transportation, telecommunications, water and sewerage were also privatised.

Let’s take the example of water. The 1980 constitution enshrined private ownership of water. This was maintained, and even deepened, following the democratic transition, since sanitation was also privatised. As a result of privatisation, people in Chile pay the highest rates in Latin America for drinking water, which is owned by large transnational corporations.

In 1981, the Water Code established that water is a national good for public use but also an economic good. Water ownership was separated from land ownership, so that there are water owners who have no land and landowners who have no water. An overwhelming majority of people wanted to end the privatisation of water.

The neoliberal economic model has created a wide gulf between the rich and the poor. In 2019, Chile was the most socially unequal country in the OECD. This model has brought good macroeconomic results, on the one hand, in the areas of trade balances, per capita income, and increased wealth of the elite and in the country’s image; however, it has led to a vast deepening of economic inequality on the other.

Rather than producing wealth for all, the model has produced millionaires. Chilean GDP is concentrated in a few families, while half of the population lives on a little more than a minimum monthly salary.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the social problems faced by people. Unemployment, poverty and hunger are on the rise. Many working people want privatised resources to be returned to public ownership and democratic control and more public spending on education, health, pensions and social welfare. They want public services like water in public ownership.

The writer is a freelance journalist.