**Triumph of hope**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-12-22

FOR many of us, the first response to the outcome of Sunday`s Chilean presidential election was an immense sigh of relief. In last month`s first round, the leading candidate was José Antonio Kast, an ultra-conservative candidate whose platform reflected an unabashed nostalgia for the nightmare ushered in by the military junta of Gen Augusto Pinochet.

Close behind was Gabriel Boric, 35, who had earned his spurs as a student activist just a decade ago. More significantly, the vision he offered was in stark contrast to Kast`s retro-fascist tendencies. After winning the presidential primary in his lef t-wing coalition earlier this year, Boric declared: `Chile was the birthplace of neoliberalism, and it shall also be its grave! Ahead of the run-off round, both Kast and Boric strove to win over the middle ground.

History, as it turned out, tended to favour the latter. A couple of weeks before polling, credible documentary evidence emerged proving that Kast`s father had joined the Nazi partyin Germanyin1942,eightyearsbeforeemigrating to Chile.

Then, just three days before the election, Pinochet`s widow, Lucia Hiriart, shuf fled of f the mortal coil.

Her well-timed exit sparked celebrations across the nation, but even those who might have considered it impolitic to jubilate could hardly have avoided reflecting on the depths of depravity Chile plumbed during her long tenure as first lady. In his own memoirs, Pinochet had reflected on her influence in driving him to decapitate democracy in 1973.

Despite all that, the run-of f was billed as a close contest. In the event, Boric romped home by a 12pc margin. In many countries that would be considered a landslide. What`s more, he received more votes than any previous presidential candidate.

Contrary to the practice of his idols Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, Kast, to his credit, was quick in conceding defeat. And the incumbent, conservative billionaire Sebastian Piñera, promptly reached out to his successor, suggesting a smooth transition.

Boric will be sworn in on March 11. One can only wonder whether, in the interim, Chile will experience any of the dark manoeuvres that were set in motion 51 years ago af ter another socialist, Salvador Allende, was elected president. The chain of subversion stretched from elements of Chile`s military and captains of industry to CIA and the Nixon White House, and included the assassination of a constitutionalist army chief.

The initial attempt did not succeed, but efforts carried on, culminating in the dastardly coup of Sept 11,1973. It took more than 15 years for any semblance of representativerule to be revived, and that too under the highly restrictive Pinochet constitution of 1980. Among other retrogressive measures, were the ruthlessly divisive economics imported from the Chicago school, turning Chile into a Petri dish for neoliberalism.

The model was subsequently rolled out across Latin America and much of the developing world, often via a pincer movement by the IMF and the World Bank. It has lef t Chile with barely existent welfare provisions, a privatised system of pensions, and some of the world`s starkest disparities of wealth.

Since 1990, power has alternated between Christian Democrat and Socialist parties, with neither side daring to go beyond tinkering on the edges of the status quo. The last straw for millions of Chileans turned out to be a relatively inconsequential four per cent increase in subway fares. There were obviously a plethora of other daily frustrations buried beneath that explosion in October 2019.

The state`s response was brutal repression, with armed soldiers returning to the streetsfor the first time since military rule. A compromise was eventually reached, setting in motion elections earlier this year to a constitutional assembly tasked with rewriting the nation`s basic law. Kast vehemently opposed the process and threatened to derail it.

Boric, on the other hand, isan enthusiastic reformist.

In the mainstream Western media, the Chilean election was invariably portrayed as a contest between extremes, but that was only half true. Kast has connections with the hard right in nations ranging from Brazil to Germany and Spain. Boric comes across as a social democrat rather than a Marxist revolutionary. His agenda nonetheless is relatively radical, stretching from indigenous inclusion and women`s rights to environmental plans that are bound to upset the mining and logging corporations.

The extent to which he will be able to pursue it will depend on various factors, not least the less than encouraging composition of Chile`s parliament. Not surprisingly, his victory has cheered other left-leaning governments and movements in Latin America, but powerful forces within Chile will be striving to undermine him.

The wide avenues of Santiago were on Sunday packed with jubilant crowds celebrating the triumph of hope over fear. One can only hope their infectious enthusiasm wasn`t premature. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com