



Jorge Silva/Reuters

A country known as stodgy and conservative has just elected a Socialist and agnostic woman as president.

LETTER FROM CHILE/Larry Rohter

With a New Leader, Chile Seems to Shuck Its Strait Laces

SANTIAGO, Chile, March 7 — This is the most socially conservative and tradition-minded country in Latin America, or so Chileans are accustomed to being told and to thinking about themselves. So how is it that the new president, who is to take office here on Saturday, is not just a woman, but also a single mother and an agnostic?

The triumph of Michelle Bachelet, 54, a Socialist, pediatrician and former exile, in January's election was clearly a political watershed both for Chile and Latin America. But it has also set Chileans to wondering if perhaps their supposedly inhibited and stodgy society hasn't also become more modern and broad-minded than they had ever imagined possible.

In a book that has been widely commented on and that anticipated the rise of Ms. Bachelet, "The Chilean Dream: Community, Family and Nation at the Bicentennial," the sociologist Eugenio Tironi maintained that modernization here arrived in three waves. First came an economic opening in the 1980's under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, then a political modernization in the 1990's after the return of democracy and civilian rule.

"Recent years," Mr. Tironi argued in the book, published a year ago, have initiated "the phase of cultural liberalization" and a "new moral climate." Taken as a whole, he concludes, "Chile seems to be evolving toward a liberal model of society of the North American type," marked by greater individualism, an erosion of the traditional family structure and greater social tolerance.

One index of that shift is that last year nearly 60 percent of all babies were born out of wedlock, compared with less than half in 2000. Yet for every sign of change, there seems to be a counterexample of the persistence of traditional values and resistance to more relaxed sexual and social mores.

Prior censorship of films, which had kept movies like "The Last Temptation of Christ" out of Chilean theaters for 15 years, ended only in 2003. But in sharp contrast to a place like Brazil, where a pop song called "Sin Does Not Exist Below the Equator" was once a big hit, explicitly erotic magazines are not displayed at newsstands, and nudity and coarse language are absent from prime-time television.

In the social realm, divorce was approved less than 18 months ago, after more than a century of debate during which Chileans could only "nullify" their marriages through legal subter-

fuge. But abortion remains proscribed, as do the gay unions now offered in parts of Brazil and Argentina, and any discussion of the morning-after pill or sex education in the schools immediately provokes controversy.

Part of the resistance is simply a result of the unusual power wielded by the Roman Catholic Church here, more conservative than its counterparts in places like Brazil and Peru. During the Pinochet dictatorship, the church, under Cardinal Raúl Silva Enríquez, was the most visible and effective defender of human rights through its Vicariate of Solidarity, saving dozens of opposition figures — including some who are in power today — from jail or even death.

"But when democracy was re-established, the church handed the democratic coalition the

The iron hand of Pinochet has given way to divorce, the end of movie censorship and public posing in the nude.

bill," explained Arturo Valenzuela, who is director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University and comes from a Chilean family. "It was, 'We took care of you guys, so don't mess around with divorce.' Yet the ones who handed over that bill weren't the same ones who had protected the Christian Democrats and the Socialists; they represented a church that had moved right."

The news media here have historically been unusually conservative, too, and thus have served to inhibit rather than promote new values, many social analysts say. But Chile's embrace of free market capitalism, originally imposed by advisers of General Pinochet who were followers of Milton Friedman, is forcing changes even in that realm.

One leading television channel here, for instance, is the property of the Roman Catholic university. But in order to maintain the ratings necessary to attract advertisers, it has had to turn to the same mix of reality shows and racy prime-

time soap operas, including some featuring premarital sex and gay characters, as its secular competitors.

Another factor in bringing about change is clearly generational. More than half the country's 15 million people were not even in school when democratic rule was restored, meaning the authoritarian practices and values of General Pinochet's 17-year dictatorship, including its emphasis on God, nation and family, are as much a fading memory as the Socialist Salvador Allende's earlier stress on social solidarity and mass political engagement.

Some, however, argue that Chile has never been as socially conservative as it often appeared in the past. A historian and social critic, Alfredo Jocelyn-Holt, for example, talks of a "subterranean" Chile in which abortion, homosexuality and other socially condemned actions have flourished.

It is not that "Chile is more pious or saintly than other countries," but that "society is much more liberal in its behavior than its discourse," he said. "What exists here is a situation that limits the expression, but not the practice."

One landmark event that brought such disapproved behavior to the surface occurred June 30, 2002, when the American photographer Spencer Tunick came here to shoot a series of pictures of multitudes of people naked in public places. To the shock of those accustomed to thinking of Chileans as inhibited, and who predicted Mr. Tunick's failure, an estimated 4,000 people were willing to take part in the project on a cold winter morning when the soccer World Cup final was being played.

The event had so much impact here that academics and journalists began to speculate about a "destape," or "uncorking," like the rapid transformation into a modern society that occurred in Spain after the fall of the Franco dictatorship. But others, like the pollster Marta Lagos, argue that a more relevant comparison is with Ireland, another Catholic country where pockets of traditional values continue to coexist with more liberal, modern attitudes.

"What our numbers tell us is that the speed of changes in values in Chile is much slower than in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil or Mexico," Ms. Lagos said. "We are changing, but we are still lagging behind in leaving the traditional society for one that is more modern and open. So in the end, it is a question of seeing the glass as half empty or half full."