

'All I want in life is to walk along the beach, holding my lover's hand'

But Chile had other plans for Michelle Bachelet. Now she is set to shatter its macho culture and political traditions by becoming its first ever female president. Jonathan Franklin went to meet her

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A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Michelle Bachelet was a 23-year-old medical student in Chile when a gang of military men broke into her house and kidnapped both her and her mother, Angela Jeria. It was January 1975, and the Chilean secret police officers were crushing protests and eliminating civilians on the orders of military dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Michelle, a popular and politically active student, was one of thousands accused of being an "enemy" of the new regime. "They put tape and dark glasses over our eyes. We couldn't see," Bachelet recounts in her office in central Santiago. "They tortured me. They hit me. But they did not put me on the parillada [metal table used to torture prisoners with electricity]." In a nearby room, her mother was similarly tortured and kept for nearly a week without food or water.

"It was 30 days of total fear," explains Elizabeth Lira, an expert on Chilean human rights. "Rape was frequent. Plus the punches, sexual abuse, denigration. They had very long interrogations and the use of electric current was common. You had to listen to the others being tortured." Thanks to family connections with top military officials, both women were spared death and instead exiled to Australia. Within five years, she returned to Chile and started working as a clandestine human rights activist.

Today Bachelet, a 54-year-old former paediatrician, is the most admired politician in Chile. She is on the brink of being elected president. While the meteoric rise of Bachelet was initially dismissed as a passing trend, today she is the clear favourite to win on December 11. Current polls show Bachelet with a comfortable 25-point lead over her nearest rival. Bachelet, a lifelong member of the Chilean Socialist party, is closely allied to the hugely popular President Ricardo Lagos and with a calm social scene and booming economy is expected to win the election easily, either in the next month's first round or a run-off in January.

If elected, this single mother of three will shatter centuries of political traditions in both Chile and South America. Bachelet would be the first woman elected president of a major South American nation. "People see I am a mother and head of a household. Today in Chile, one-third of households are run by women. They wake up, take the children to school, go to work," says Bachelet. "To them I am hope."

Bachelet's candidacy has already catapulted women's health and job issues to the forefront of the political stage. Her rightwing opponent, Joaquin Lavín, has proposed that housewives be given pensions when they retire at 65, and the entire capital city of Santiago is now awash with photos of female candidates hopping on to the bandwagon.

"Michelle makes you feel like we did it together. She is just one more [part of the team]," says Teresa Boj Jonas, a nutritionist who worked under Bachelet in the health ministry. "The other day I went to a party with 15 women and 10 men. They were all talking about Michelle and her magic. She is awakening the idea that we need new style of politics, not confrontational. She generates confidence."

But the steely confidence shown by Bachelet was honed in one of the continent's most brutal governments, the 1973-1990 military regime led by Pinochet, which killed approximately 3,000 Chilean civilians.

In many cases their bodies were dropped from helicopters into the Pacific Ocean. One of the "disappeared" was Bachelet's then boyfriend, Jamie Lopez, who was tortured for weeks until he revealed all the names of guerrillas fighting in the resistance against the dictatorship.

Bachelet, however, did not crack under torture. She kept her secrets and emerged fortified from the experience. From the moment she was exiled to Australia in 1975, Michelle Bachelet fought for democracy.

"I noticed that one of the barriers to full democracy was the fault of understanding between the military world and the civilian world," says Bachelet. "They spoke different languages. I wanted to help with that. I could be a bridge between those two worlds."

Her hard work led to a surprise government job. In 2002, she was named minister of defence. To the arch-conservative and Catholic military, the appointment was a stark reminder that the authoritarian ways of Pinochet had ended. Never had a woman held that post in South America. Now she was commanding the same military that had ordered the deaths of her father, boyfriend and friends.

As she travelled around Chile in her new role, crowds gathered to get a glimpse of this new celebrity. Everywhere she stopped, in small towns, at police stations, and even on the highway, citizens groped for a view and a chance to meet this gregarious minister. "It was like travelling with a rock star," jokes Angela Jeria.

As her popularity soared, a group of senators invited her to a secret meeting. Was she interested in the party's nomination? Did she realise that thousands of citizens were asking them to give her the candidacy? Then one senator asked: "What do you want in life?"

"You all want to know what is my dream?" said Bachelet. "Very simple. To walk along the beach, holding the hand of my lover."

The men looked at each other, stunned. The most highly valued politician in Chile was putting politics below her personal goals of happiness. From that moment, the traditional rules of politics in Chile were shattered. Not only was a single mum on the path to take power in one of South America's most macho societies, but she was doing it without the usual negative attacks that politicians use.

In preparation, Bachelet has been travelling the world meeting the likes of Hillary Clinton. "As women politicians, we talk about the most difficult themes of state security, foreign relations and development models, then ask, 'How do you make it work with your husband?' The interesting thing is that these women - most of them - don't lose the perspective that the focus is not the position but the job at hand."

How does she balance being a single mother with a very demanding career? "You are in a meeting and afterwards they tell you your son called and needs wax paper for his homework. It is not that you cancel your meeting, but after your day, you go to the supermarket to buy the supplies."

"She is a great team leader. People worked seven days a week, all night, felt pushed to work with her," says Jeria. "Chilean men love her charisma, they find her sincere, she doesn't hide anything. For Chilean women she is a model of what is possible."

Those possibilities are even being felt in neighbouring nations. In recent senate elections in Argentina Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, the Argentine first lady, swept into office. And now in Peru, former MP Lourdes Flores is leading polls in the race for next year's presidential elections.

Female world leaders

Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Entered politics after the assassination of her husband. First served as prime minister 1991-96.

Finland President Tarja Halonen. Narrowly elected in 2000; dubbed Mama Moomin (Troll).

Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel. Germany's first female chancellor will take office this week.

Ireland President Mary McAleese. Succeeded Mary Robinson in 1997. A lawyer and former news presenter, McAleese is the first president from Northern Ireland.

Latvia President Vaira Vike-Freiberga. A former Canadian citizen, Vike-Freiberga returned to Latvia in 1998, becoming president in 1999. Also known as the Iron Lady.

Liberia President-elect Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The first elected female president in Africa.

Mozambique Prime Minister Luisa Dias Diogo. Appointed PM in 2004, Dias Diogo is also finance minister.

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark. President since 1999.

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Swept to power in on the back of a four-day popular revolt in 2001, re-elected in 2004.

• Source: UN, Nov 2005

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