

CHILEAN PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFUL "MARCO" QUILTS SOCIALISTS

Contributed by Benjamin Witte
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"Marco" looking more and more like a real contender
Photo by Benjamin Witte

Poll: Support For Enriquez-Ominami Doubled In One Month

Upstart candidate Marco Enriquez-Ominami celebrated his 36th birthday Friday by resigning from the Socialist Party. The move in many ways formalized what is now an officially independent quest to bypass Chile's two dominant coalitions and capture the presidency.

In his resignation letter, Enriquez-Ominami — who had been a member of the political group for 15 years — accused PS head Camilo Escalona and other party leaders of straying from their founding ideals.

"You and other leaders have backed off from the promise of joy, openness and democracy that we made in the late 1980s. Instead you've opted for a dark, exclusive and authoritarian brand of politics," the letter reads.

Enriquez-Ominami's resignation marks the latest chapter in his ongoing dispute with PS leaders, who fear his run for the presidency could cost the center-left Concertación coalition the election. Earlier in the week Escalona accused Enriquez-Ominami, a first-term deputy, of "electoral fraud" for mounting an independent campaign while technically remaining a member of the party.

The Concertación, formed at the tail end of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), ties together the PS, Christian Democratic (DC) party, Radical Party (PRSD) and Party for Democracy (PPD). The coalition has won every presidential election since Chile returned to democracy.

The PS and other Concertación member parties have thrown their weight behind DC Sen. Eduardo Frei, who already served once as Chile's president (1994-2000). But even with endorsements from both President Michelle Bachelet and her predecessor, Ricardo Lagos, Frei continues to trail wealthy businessman Sebastián Piñera. A member of the center-right National Renovation (RN) party, Piñera represents the conservative Alliance for Chile coalition.

Until recently the election looked very much to be a two-horse race between Frei and Piñera, political veterans who are unlikely to face any serious challenge from fringe candidates Alejandro Navarro, Adolfo Zaldívar and Jorge Arrate.

Polls suggest that is no longer the case. A non-factor until just a few months ago, Enriquez-Ominami — "Marco" as he's been dubbed in the media — is surging of late and now appears to be a legitimate contender.

A poll released Thursday by the survey group Imaginación has the dark horse candidate (20.9 percent) running third behind Piñera (34.9 percent) and Frei (29.9 percent). Momentum, however, appears to be on Enriquez-Ominami's side. One month ago Imaginación polled him at just 10.5 percent.

A survey released earlier this month by TNS Time offered even more encouraging news for Enriquez-Ominami. When asked to choose from a fixed list of candidates, 26 percent of respondents opted for the deputy compared to just 22 percent for Frei. Piñera led the survey with 35 percent (PT, June 3).

Enriquez-Ominami told reporters Friday he was "happy" to quit the PS and said he is confident that after pushing past Frei to secure a runoff against Piñera, he will eventually receive President Bachelet's endorsement. Escalona, in turn, characterized the deputy's resignation as a "publicity stunt."

Described as the "candidate of the moment" in a recent *El Mercurio* article, images of Enriquez-Ominami are suddenly ubiquitous in Chile's mainstream media, which normally shuns "third party" candidates. The deputy's youth, charisma and show business ties (he is married to popular television host Karen Doggenweiler) may be partly responsible for success in bucking that trend.

No doubt his biography helps too. Exiled in France during his early childhood, Enriquez-Ominami is the son of journalist/author Manuela Gumucio and Miguel Enríquez, who led Chile's militant Movement for the Radical Left (MIR) before being killed in 1974 by Pinochet's secret police. His stepfather, Carlos Ominami, is a member of the Senate.

Despite his now constant media exposure, Enriquez-Ominami remains something of a political enigma. His experience in national politics is limited, especially compared to his rivals. Piñera served in the Senate between 1990 and 1998 and was the runner up in the last presidential election. Frei has held a Senate seat since the end of his presidency. Enriquez-Ominami, in contrast, has served in Chile's lower house of Congress only since 2006.

Enriquez-Ominami's campaign platform, furthermore, is difficult to characterize as typically "right" or "left." Left-wing progressives applaud his take on gay marriage and abortion, both of which he thinks should be made legal. He has also raised eyebrows by calling for the legalization of marijuana. Enriquez-Ominami is drawing support from environmentalists too. Last month he came out publicly against the controversial HidroAysén dam project, slated for Patagonia's Baker and Pascua Rivers (PT, May 19). On the other hand, he has challenged the far left's traditional anti-neoliberal discourse by promoting privatization of certain state holdings.

"Part of his attraction has to do with how transversal he is," political analyst Oscar Godoy told the Patagonia Times. "His economic proposals, for example, include privatization. But at the same time he's for raising taxes on companies and lowering them for individuals. So he plays with elements from both the right and left, and that's satisfying to people."

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