

RADICAL PARTY THREATENS TO LEAVE CHILE'S GOVERNING COALITION

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After Nearly Two Decades In Power, Concertación Shows Signs Of Unraveling

Chile's ruling Concertación coalition, in power since the end of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, is in danger of losing one of its four component parties.

Sen. José Antonio Gómez, the head of the Radical Social Democratic Party (PRSD), notified Concertación leaders Monday that his party is prepared to part ways if their proposals are not incorporated into Sen. Eduardo Frei's presidential campaign platform.

Gómez also raised the possibility of entering the presidential race as an independent.

"Many leaders in our party have expressed their uncertainty about PRSD remaining in the coalition," Dep. Fernando Menza, vice-president of the party, told El Mercurio on Wednesday. "You have to show that you're ready to defend your ideas, and in this situation we completely support our president's plans. If tomorrow the rest of the Concertación insists on ignoring us, they'll be responsible for the consequences."

The PRSD, formerly the Radical Party, was one of the founding members of the Concertación, which formed toward the end of the Pinochet regime. The Radical Party, aligned with the Masonic order, was a powerful player in Chile's political scene in the 1940s and 1950s but has declined in significance the past several decades.

Still, as part of the governing, center-left coalition, the PRSD and the other three Concertación parties (the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Party for Democracy) have dominated Chile's Congress. The coalition has won every presidential election since the country's return to democracy in 1990.

Its margins of victory, however, have shrunk each election cycle. And increasingly, leaders have left the coalition, claiming it has strayed from its founding ideals.

A quarter of the Concertación's senators have renounced the coalition since 2007. Many deputies have also left, including independent presidential candidate Marco Enriquez-Ominami.

The PRSD is the smallest member of the Concertación. But its departure would still be a significant blow. The party currently claims three senators and seven deputies.

Gómez said this week that his party finds itself in "total isolation" within the Concertación.

Since April, the Concertación has refused to incorporate PRSD proposals into Frei's presidential campaign, Gómez said.

The party's request to name at least two senators and 10 deputy candidates has also fallen on deaf ears, pointing to the lack of representation in the party's "power structure," Gómez said.

If the PRSD leaves the Concertación, the party will supply its own list of congressional candidates.

"As things are, it practically works out the same for us to run independent of the Concertación rather than within it," Gómez told Concertación leaders, according to sources present at Monday's meeting. "It doesn't matter if we elect one or two deputies less, if it means independence."

Concertación leaders said they were confident tension with the PRSD would fade. Carolina Tohá, spokeswoman for President Michelle Bachelet's government, said these complaints "are typical";

"They usually happen during negotiations for different deputy and senate candidacies," she told daily La Nación. "We hope to get over them very quickly."

But Monday's meeting was not the first time the PRSD has clashed with the Concertación.

Gómez originally competed with Frei to receive the Concertación's presidential nomination for the December election, but lost the April primary to Sen. Eduardo Frei (a Christian Democrat) and pulled out of the race. Some Concertación leaders were troubled by Gómez's challenge to Frei and exchanged harsh words with the PRSD

president.

The party also named its own candidates, in coordination with the coalition's Party for Democracy (PPD), in the 2008 municipal elections. The PRSD refused to cave to pressure from other coalition leaders, including President Michele Bachelet, and ran independent candidates. Overall, the party's representation grew in the elections.

"Our party has already shown in the primaries that it's not willing to accept impositions," said Guillermo Vásquez, the head of the party's senatorial committee. "The PRSD is not going to be pushed around again, so our allies will have to seriously consider what we're doing now and the consequences it will bring."

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