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Chile

A feminist revolution engulfs Chile

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Description:

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For the past month, Chile has been living to the rhythm of demonstrations and university occupations by a historic feminist movement, calling for non-sexist education and the end of harassment and of gender inequality in the health system.

On Wednesday 6 June, 100,000 women marched through the streets of Santiago, the capital of Chile, according to the University Feminist Coordinating Committee (Confeu), with the slogan: "We are all victims of precarity: students, migrants, mothers and women who work in the streets!" For a month, this South American country has been living to the rhythm of demonstrations and occupations of universities, against harassment and sexual assault.

This feminist movement is "unprecedented" in this country marked by the dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973-1990), where the Catholic Church "exerts considerable weight" on the political apparatus and on society, explains Franck Gaudichaud, senior lecturer in Latin American civilization at the University of Grenoble and a specialist on Chile.

It all started out with a professor at the University of Southern Chile in Valdivia, 850 kilometres south of the capital, who was found guilty of sexual harassment of a woman employee of the college. His only punishment was that he was simply forced to change jobs, which led to the first feminist occupation of the university on 17 April. The University of Chile, in Santiago, where two professors were accused in 2016 (respectively for abuse of power and sexual harassment), followed suit. As did twenty universities in the country, which have also been blocked since then. "It is the spark that ignited the movement: the demand to end impunity in Chilean universities. Moreover, people are talking about the 'Chilean May'", notes Franck Gaudichaud.

Untouchable stalkers

This feminist uprising is part of the continuity of social gains that have recently - and belatedly - been won by women. The right to divorce was only recognized in 2004 in Chile. And it was only in 2017 that the state enacted the right to abortion, limited to cases where the life of the mother is threatened, where the foetus is not viable, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape. "Since 1990, and the end of the dictatorship, the right has done everything to block the advancement of women's rights in Parliament," says the specialist. "In people's mentalities, the role of the woman is still to be a mother and a wife" - so it is "a long-term struggle" that is being undertaken.

This is all the more so since in this Latin American country, sexual harassment is punishable by law only in the context of labour relations, from which the academic framework is excluded. This is one of the reasons for the anger of Chilean students like Maria Fernanda Barrera Rodriguez, who is studying for a Master's in Political Science at the University of Chile: "We are asking for an end to gender inequalities, the culture of rape, machismo and the patriarchal system, problems whose most extreme expression lies in feminicides (it is reported that there were 36 in Chile in 2017), whose origin lies in a cycle of violence - in particular among families - which are not legally punished."

Inès Belhous, a French student in Santiago, points out that "street harassment is blatant". "On the way between my home and the university, I'm whistling at, mentally undressed by passing men, honked at by motorists, non-stop." And she concludes bitterly: "Men justify themselves by saying that machismo is part of the culture and that it is a way of valuing women."

A political response that is deemed insufficient

For more than a month, students have multiplied blockades of universities and spectacular events, sometimes topless, like the Femen, to "denude patriarchy," in their own words. For Maria Fernanda, it is about questioning "the reification of women's bodies, and their reduction to consumable objects conditioned by male canons". "We are facing a very radical movement, not a minority, very inventive. I am rather optimistic. It's a movement that shows that there is a generation that is fed up with it and will not let it go," rejoices Franck Gaudichaud.

Given the scale of the movement, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera announced in late May a series of measures in the "women's agenda", the most symbolic of which is to put gender equality in the Constitution. He hopes to calm student anger, whose ungovernable nature he knows only too well. His previous term (2010-2014) was marked by a historic student movement in favour of free, quality public education, which involved the biggest demonstrations since the fall of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990.

Those who today demonstrate against the patriarchal system have kept the memory of this struggle, and have been politicized by contesting the neoliberal conservatism that this right-wing billionaire embodies. The rapid and solemn response of Piñera does not convince the ranks of the activists of the "Chilean May". "The government's statement was necessary, but it is symbolic and insufficient, argues Maria Fernanda Barrera. For example, to eradicate the inequality of the cost of health insurance between men and women (who currently pay two to three times more than men), he proposes to align this cost with that of women. It is his particular conception of equality that hinders any real progress in the field of rights and gender equality. Nor does he speak about non-sexist education. To sum up, the government's political sector has historically opposed the reproductive rights of women, the law of gender identity, and feminist demands in general."

"The educational factor is essential"

The Chilean feminist movement, which is in part inspired by the powerful "Ni Una Menos" movement, which has spread from Argentina throughout Latin America, thus marks its radical autonomy from institutions and the political class. It also calls for the resignation of the Minister of Education, Gerardo Varela, who said that Chilean women suffer only "small humiliations and discriminations". "This is a symptom of the patriarchal political context, the power of men and white elites in Chile, where the weight of the Church and the right - which is linked to it - remains very much present," said Franck Gaudichaud.

On the political level, few opposition MPs echo the current movement. And Piñera must deal with the most conservative fringe of his coalition, firmly opposed to feminist demands. It is therefore unlikely that substantial change will come from above. Faced with the inertia of institutions, and the reluctance to change of the ruling classes, the movement therefore intends to establish the relationship of forces at the base, leading a cultural struggle to change mentalities. "The solution cannot be only punitive, the educational factor is essential, in the opinion of Maria Fernanda. That is why we demand a non-sexist education that is applied throughout the country. I do not think this movement will solve all the problems, but what is happening in Chile will bring about a profound cultural change - it has already done so."

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