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Chile's Bachelet in trouble after first year

By Gideon Long

SANTIAGO, March 8 (Reuters) - A year after taking office as Chile's first female president, Michelle Bachelet is having a tough time.

Her center-left government faces allegations of corruption and nepotism, the economy is growing at its slowest rate for three years and the 55-year-old leader has even been blamed for chaos in Santiago's new transport system.

Bachelet's approval ratings have fallen and, to cap it all, the ghost of late dictator Augusto Pinochet has returned to haunt her governing four-party coalition as it prepares for what could be a difficult second year.

"As captain of the ship I expect Bachelet will face several mutinies," said Patricio Navia, a Chilean political analyst at New York University and Santiago's Diego Portales university.

"We're going to see a lot of conflict within the coalition and that will impede her ability to govern."

When Bachelet came to power a year ago on Sunday, many expected a breath of fresh air to blow through the corridors of the presidential palace.

But the mother of three, a political refugee during the 1973-1990 Pinochet dictatorship, has struggled to build on the success of her hugely popular predecessor Ricardo Lagos.

Within weeks, she faced huge protests from students and was widely viewed as having capitulated to their demands for increased educational funding.

Bachelet's center-right opponents have accused her government of sleaze after it emerged that a government agency charged with promoting grassroots sports funneled millions of dollars into non-existent projects. The case is still being investigated.

Bachelet's approval rating remained high during 2006 as Chileans responded to her warm, personal touch, but in recent months it has slipped. An overhaul of Santiago's mass transit system launched in February has not gone smoothly and some fault the president.

On Thursday, pollsters Adimark put Bachelet's personal approval rating at 49.3 percent, higher than in January and still enviably robust, but down 5 percentage points from December.

Last weekend, a poll for conservative newspaper El Mercurio showed her support had slipped to 47.5 percent from 65.3 percent when she took office.

"Bachelet's a good person but her government hasn't been good," said Archibaldo Unwin, an 82-year-old commercial engineer questioned on the street of Santiago. "Unfortunately, being a nice person doesn't mean you're a good leader."

Odd though it may appear to outsiders, the death of Pinochet in December is also cited as a reason for the government's woes.

The ruling coalition was forged in opposition to the general and now he is no longer alive, the argument goes, it has lost its *raison d'etre*.

"Pinochet is now dead and yet the coalition keeps going back to the dictatorship as its point of unity," Navia said.

The government can point to some successes.

Unemployment is at an eight-year low, inflation is minimal, Bachelet's government has approved pension reforms and, despite fierce opposition, has fulfilled its pledge to make the "morning-after" contraceptive pill more widely available.

"My evaluation of the year is positive," Bachelet said this week. "I think we've achieved tremendous things in different areas and we're going to press ahead."

The good news for Bachelet is that she still has three years before the next election and the center-right opposition has failed to make much headway.

"In 2007, the government of Michelle Bachelet will have to concentrate on accomplishing those parts of its plans that were left incomplete last year," said Guillermo Holzmann, director of the Institute of Political Science at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago.

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