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Bachelet sworn in as Chilean president, pledges 'fairer' society

BY GIDEON LONG

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Michelle Bachelet pledged to make Chile "different and fairer" after being sworn in as president Tuesday in a ceremony rich with symbolism.

But the inauguration was notable for the absence of one man — Nicolas Maduro, the president of Venezuela.

Maduro has been due to arrive in Santiago in the morning but failed to show up amid the crisis in his homeland. At least 22 people have been killed in Venezuela since violent protests against the government erupted last month, including two Monday night.

Bachelet, a Socialist who has so far said little about the situation in Venezuela, takes over from Sebastian Piñera, a billionaire businessman who has ruled Chile for the past four years.

She becomes the first democratically elected Chilean head of state since 1952 to return to the presidential palace for a second term, having already made history in 2006 as Chile's first female president.

In an emotional ceremony in the Congress building in the port city of Valparaiso, Isabel Allende, the first female head of the Chilean Senate, placed the red, white and blue presidential sash around Bachelet's neck. It was the first time that one woman had passed the sash to another.

The two women have a shared history, linked to the military coup of 1973 that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. Allende is the daughter of Salvador Allende, the Socialist president who was deposed by Pinochet and who committed suicide on the day of the coup, while Bachelet's father was an air force officer who was tortured by the Pinochet regime and died in custody.

"I want to pay special homage to my father and to all those who gave their lives in the fight to recover democracy," a visibly moved Allende said as she was sworn in as head of the upper house. "I know he'd be proud to see his daughter in this role."

Around a dozen Latin American leaders were at the ceremony including Brazil's Dilma Rousseff and the leaders of Chile's three closest neighbours: Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. Vice President Joe Biden represented the United States.

With Maduro absent, Venezuela's representative was its foreign minister, Elias Jaua. No reason was given for the president's no-show.

Several right-wing members of the Chilean parliament wore lapel badges during the event that read "S.O.S. Venezuela" in solidarity with that country's opposition. Hundreds of Venezuelans living in Chile have staged protests in Santiago recently to voice their anger with the Maduro government.

On Tuesday, a small group of leftists turned up at Congress to express their support for the government in Caracas. They waved red, yellow and blue Venezuelan flags and carried posters of Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chávez, the father of the country's so-called "Bolivarian revolution."

The region's foreign ministers will meet in Chile on Wednesday to discuss the Venezuelan crisis, which has prompted concern across Latin America.

In Chile, it triggered one of the first political spats of the Bachelet era even before she assumed power. Two of the parties in her coalition – the Communists and the Christian Democrats (DC) – failed to agree on what the coalition's stance on Venezuela should be. The head of the DC, Ignacio Walker, described their differences over human rights as "irreconcilable."

After returning to Santiago from Valparaiso, Bachelet gave the first speech of her new government from a balcony of La Moneda, the presidential palace.

She appeared to take a swipe at the economic policies of Piñera, which have generated impressive growth and employment over the past four years but have left many Chileans feeling that they have missed out on the party.

"We believe that Chile can be different and fairer," Bachelet told hundreds of supporters gathered in the early evening sunshine outside the palace.

"I hope that on the day I leave this place, you will feel that your lives have changed for the better. That Chile is not just a list of indicators and statistics, but a better country in which to live, a better society

for all its people," she said.

In yet another highly symbolic act, Claudia Pascual was sworn in as Chile's first Communist minister since the days of Salvador Allende. The Communists have made significant ground recently and won six of the 120 congressional seats in November's election, tripling their previous representation.

Pascual, a 41-year-old social anthropologist, is Bachelet's minister for women, and one of nine women in the new cabinet.

This second Bachelet government promises to be more radical than her first.

She has vowed to overhaul the country's education system, which relies heavily on household contributions to top up meager state funding, and turn it into a fully state-funded system within the next six years, funding her plan via an increase in the basic corporate tax rate.

This, despite the prospect of slowing economic growth, which fell from 5.6 percent in 2012 to little over 4 percent last year. With prices for Chile's main export commodity, copper, easing, the Central Bank has warned that growth could slip below 4 percent in 2014.

Some business leaders have complained that Bachelet's left-wing agenda will only exacerbate this slowdown and drive away foreign investors.

Nonetheless, Bachelet will enjoy a clear majority in both houses of parliament, something she lacked for much of her first term, and should also be able to rely on parliamentary support from a handful of left-wing independents to push through her ambitious agenda.

The outgoing president, Piñera, wished her luck and said Chile was a better country in which to live than it had been four years ago.

"We inherited a country that had been shaken by an earthquake," he said, referring to the 8.8 magnitude quake that devastated a large swathe of Chile in February 2010, two weeks before he became president. "And we're handing it over reconstructed."

"We inherited a country that had been losing its force and we're handing it over strong."

Piñera leaves office with an approval rating of around 50 percent. He is widely expected to run for the presidency again in 2017.