Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Chileans are divided in a presidential runoff on Sunday

Ask many Chileans how their country fared in the past several years and they'll describe a descent into disaster: Venezuelan gangs surged across porous borders, bringing unprecedented kidnappings and contract killings to one of the region's safest nations.

A social uprising unleashed violent chaos on once-sleepy streets. An economy long vaunted for its rapid growth sputtered into a stall.

These are the voters who hope to elect their country's most right-wing president since its military dictatorship on Sunday.

Former lawmaker José Antonio Kast, 59, they argue, can bring back the simple, stable life that Chileans lost to rising crime, uncontrolled migration and left-wing excesses. Kast's rival in this runoff presidential election is their worst fear: a communist.

"We need to go back in time to when Chile meant peace and quiet, when there weren't so many Venezuelans and Colombians in the streets, when you didn't have to look over your shoulder every second," said Ernesto Romero, 70, shucking corn at his vegetable stall in Chile's capital of Santiago.

A deeply polarized electorate

Ask the same question to other Chileans and they'll recount an opposite reality: A shorter workweek, higher minimum wage and more generous pension system made one of Latin America's most unequal countries more livable, they say.

The homicide rate declined in the last two years, official figures show. A defiant foreign policy — outspoken about Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro 's repression, U.S. President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigrants and Israel's actions against Palestinians — made Chile a regional champion of democracy and human rights.

These are the voters who hope, against heavy odds, to elect their country's most left-wing president since its return to democracy in 1990.

Jeannette Jara, 51, they argue, can save Chile from the wave of far-right populismthat has upended politics across the world.

> Jara's rival is their worst fear: The son of a Nazi party member

Jara's rival is their worst fear: The son of a Nazi party member with a fondness for Gen. Augusto Pinochet's brutal dictatorship.

"We need to go forward," said Lucía Poblete, a 32-year-old engineer at Jara's rally late Wednesday. "Kast will erase all the progress we've made for women, for labor rights, for civil freedoms."

The chasm between Chilean perspectives on the status quo underscores not only the depth of Chile's divisions but also the stakes of Sunday's showdown, which Kast is expected to win after 70% of voters backed right-leaning parties in the first round.

Kast vows to make Chile safe again

Today, Kast is hoping the third time's the charm, and his presidential run has so far been a much more effective endeavor than the previous two. That's largely thanks to fears of organized crime and immigration driving voters to the right.

"Jara seems more grounded, more sensible. But it's not the time for that. It's time for drastic measures, for shows of force," said Eduardo Marillana, 48, a former Jara supporter who jumped ship for Kast after his truck was stolen a few weeks ago. "Whether we like it or not, we need the far right now."

In 2021, the Catholic father of nine lost the runoff election to current President Gabriel Boric, a former firebrand student protest leader who rattled investors with his promises to "bury neoliberalism" but appealed to

millions of ordinary Chileans sick of fiscal austerity, angry about social inequality and eager to reexamine Chile's traumatic past.

Kast's family ties to the Nazi party sparked an uproar at the time — as did his apparent nostalgia for Gen. Pinochet (who he said "would vote for me if he were alive") and his fierce opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion without exception.

> Kast has dodged questions about his social views, pivoting to the more politically palatable issues of insecurity and mass migration

This time, Kast has dodged questions about his social views, pivoting to the more politically palatable issues of insecurity and mass migration that have ginned up voter anxiety and boosted the right from Washington to Paris.

Taking a page from Trump's playbook, Kast vows mass deportations of the estimated 337,000 migrants in Chile without legal status — mostly Venezuelans who arrived from their crisis-stricken country in the last seven years.

Studying the crime-fighting tactics of El Salvador's popular autocratic president, Nayib Bukele, Kast proposes boosting the power of police and expanding maximum-security prison capacity.

Borrowing from Argentina's radical libertarian President Javier Milei, Kast aims to slash red tape, shrink the public payroll and cut state spending by $6 billion within just 18 months of taking office.

His economic team on Thursday pushed back against criticism that such a budget cut was unrealistic — or unnecessary as Chile's budget strains pale next to Argentina's economic shambles.

But it acknowledged to The Associated Press that it might be "preferable to allow for an adjustment over a longer period."

Underdog Jara faces tough odds

Perhaps at any other moment, Jara would have a lot going for her.

She engineered Boric's most significant welfare measures as his minister of labor.

What keeps Jeannette Jara in the game is her appeal as a bulwark against the sort of right-wing radicalism that has eroded the rule of law elsewhere

Her humble origins selling hot dogs and toilet paper to get through school makes for a compelling up-from-nothing story rare in Chile's elite circles of power. She has a strong record of negotiating with rivals to get things done.

But experts say it'll take a miracle for her to pry a victory from Kast.

"There are just too many things stacked against her" said Robert Funk, associate professor of political science at the University of Chile.

The most glaring: Being a communist. Although her proposals to boost foreign investment and promote fiscal restraint hardly smack of communism, analysts say her membership in the party since age 14 undercuts efforts to lure moderate conservatives.

"Just the name 'Communist Party scares people," said Lucía Dammert, a sociologist and Boric's first chief of staff.

Then there's the challenge of representing a government with a 30% approval rating in a country where citizens have voted out

incumbent leaders at every election since 2005. Add to that the difficulty of appearing tough on crime next to Kast.

"This campaign is among the most difficult I've ever run, by far," Ricardo Solari, Jara's campaign strategist and a former minister, told the AP.

What keeps Jara in the game, he insisted, is her appeal as a bulwark against the sort of right-wing radicalism that has eroded the rule of law elsewhere.

"The right exaggerates insecurity to convince people that the only possible response is extreme force," Solari said. "We've seen elsewhere in Latin America that when that happens, ultimately what gets imprisoned is democracy itself."