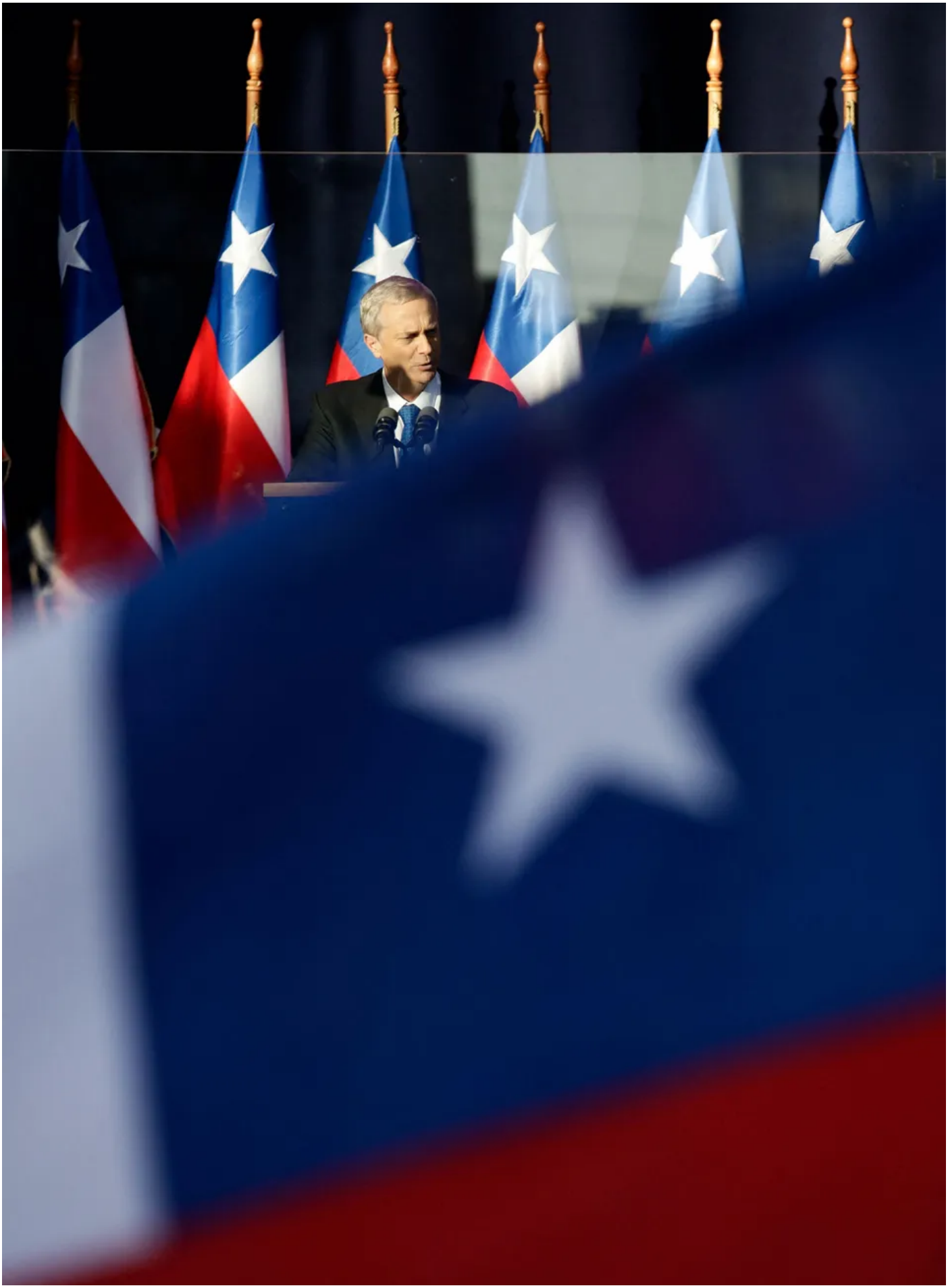
THE RIGHT WING RISES IN LATIN AMERICA

The new President of Chile joins a new class of leaders trying to seize the future by rewriting the past.

By Jon Lee Anderson

December 23, 2025



José Antonio Kast speaks at a rally in Temuco, Chile, in December. Photograph by Juan Gonzalez / Reuters

On December 14th, the ultraconservative politician José Antonio Kast won a runoff election to become Chile's next President. With his victory, the growing club of right-wing leaders in Latin America acquired a new member. Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian autocrat, sent Kast effusive congratulations. So did Elon Musk, who has fought a running battle with left-wing politicians in the region. President Donald Trump took credit for his win, adding, "I hear he's a very good person."

The news from Latin America has been dominated by Trump's efforts to impose his version of the Monroe Doctrine—an ethos of blatant interventionism that includes endorsing electoral candidates, then crying fraud if they underperform; imposing his will through sanctions and punitive tariffs; and deploying the U.S. Navy off the Venezuelan coast to threaten President Nicolás Maduro's regime.

Against this tense backdrop, Chile's politicians offered a model of gracious behavior. Kast's competitor, a Communist named Jeanette Jara, quickly acknowledged his victory and congratulated him. So did the current President, Gabriel Boric, a social democrat, who will step down in March after four years in office. (Chile does not allow Presidents to serve consecutive terms.) But, for observers of a historical bent, the outcome of the election presents an uncomfortable irony. Kast's father, a German émigré, was a former Nazi officer, which means that the country that once gave refuge to the war criminal Walther Rauff—who oversaw mobile gas vans that

killed roughly a hundred thousand Jews in the Second World War—has elected the son of another Nazi as President.

When I raised the issue with an acquaintance of mine who supports Kast, he chided me that the sins of the twentieth century weren't relevant now. Yet there are other disturbing synergies with the authoritarian past. Kast will be the furthest-right politician to lead Chile since General Augusto Pinochet, who seized power in a bloody coup in 1973 and ruled for seventeen long years, during which his government killed three thousand people and tortured tens of thousands more. According to Philippe Sands's recently published book "38 Londres Street," Pinochet, a Germanophile, met Rauff in Ecuador a few years after the war and invited him to Chile. There, Rauff worked as the manager of a crab cannery in Patagonia, and apparently as an interrogator in one of Pinochet's torture centers. He lived out the rest of his life in Chile, unrepentant about his crimes and protected from extradition.

For those who recall the impunity of those years, Kast's election signifies an end to a thirty-five-year period in which most Chileans repudiated Pinochet's legacy. "Kast has never criticized Pinochet's dictatorship, and in that sense he represents one of his most faithful heirs," Patricio Fernández, a prominent Chilean commentator, noted recently. Indeed, Kast has repeatedly lauded Pinochet's regime, in which one of his brothers served as a minister and as the president of the central bank. In 1988, when Pinochet called a national referendum to extend his rule, Kast, who was then a twenty-two-year-old law student, was a vocal supporter.

The referendum failed, and, two years later, Chile returned to democracy. Kast, despite his preference for autocracy, took advantage of the restored political freedoms. He won a parliamentary seat in 2001 and eventually began running for President. In 2017, he finished fourth. Four years later, after founding his own right-wing party, he came in second, to Boric. Kast conceded defeat without complaint. He stands out from some of his right-wing colleagues for his relatively understated demeanor; he is neither as

flamboyant as Javier Milei, in Argentina, nor as gleefully vicious as Nayib Bukele, in El Salvador. A pro-life Catholic with nine children, he opposes gay marriage and trans rights, objects to taxes and big government, and dislikes environmental regulations—but he presents his views in a lawyerly, reasonable-sounding way.

After losing to Boric, Kast built his following by amplifying concerns around uncontrolled immigration and increasing public insecurity. Chile has a higher standard of living than most of its neighbors and is an attractive destination for migrants. In the past decade, some two million migrants have entered the country, which has a population of only nineteen million. As in the U.S., the new arrivals have been blamed for an uptick in violent crime. Kast promised a hardline response: he vowed to deport more than three hundred thousand undocumented migrants, many of them from Venezuela, and to build several maximum-security detention centers to accommodate others. To stem the influx, he would erect fences and dig ditches along the borders with Bolivia and Peru.

Chile has spent a decade oscillating between the center left and the center right, and Kast's election is a departure—as well as an echo of a regional trend toward authoritarianism. After his victory, he travelled to Argentina, where he met with Milei, a self-described "anarcho-capitalist" who delights followers with performative attacks on the opposition. (In a WhatsApp exchange with me after Kast's victory, Milei credited the ascent of the Latin American right to voters' impatience with "suffocating taxation" and "the inefficiency, obscene privileges, and hypocrisy of left-wing politicians.") The two posed for photos next to a chainsaw, the talisman for Milei's efforts to slash government. Since assuming office, in 2023, Milei has eliminated half of Argentina's ministries. He has also espoused unswerving loyalty to Trump, echoing many of his positions. In exchange, the U.S. has supplied billions of dollars of bailout money to ease Argentina's enormous debts. Standing beside Milei, Kast theatrically exclaimed, "Freedom advances throughout Latin America!" But, when reporters asked if he planned to bring the chainsaw

ideology to Chile, he hedged, saying only that his team had been "consulting" with friendly governments—including the right-wing administrations in Argentina, Hungary, Italy, and the U.S.

Kast also said that he'd spoken with two conservative candidates whom he'd defeated in the Chilean election, suggesting that he might bring them into his government. They are the former labor minister Evelyn Matthei, whose father was a general in Pinochet's regime, and a bombastic hard-right politician with the extravagant name of Johannes Maximilian Kaiser Barents-von Hohenhagen. Kaiser, also of German descent, shares many of Kast's views, but presents them less decorously; he describes himself as a "paleolibertarian" and "reactionary," and endorses building detention camps for undocumented migrants and entirely closing the border with Bolivia. He calls for Pinochet-era torturers and murderers to be released from prison. Kast does, too, but he says it more elliptically. Earlier this month, as Chile's parliament was discussing a bill to release aging or infirm repressors from prison, Kast said, "I don't believe in plea bargaining. I believe in justice. And this means treating people with terminal illnesses, or those who are [no longer conscious], with respect."

In 2023, on the fiftieth anniversary of Pinochet's coup, Boric reminded Chileans of the terrible price their country had paid, and announced a national search plan to ascertain the destinies of as many as three thousand citizens who remain missing. There are tens of thousands of people in Chile who survived being attacked by their own government, or who lost loved ones. This means that Kast will likely have to move carefully on issues of "historical memory." But, half a century after the Pinochet coup, there is a disquieting trend in the hemisphere. That coup, which overthrew a Socialist government allied with Fidel Castro's Cuba, was abetted by the Nixon Administration and its regional allies—right-wing military regimes that proceeded to wage a series of dirty wars against leftist citizens of their own countries. In Trump's current standoff with Maduro, whom he has branded a "narcoterrorist," right-wingers such as Kast and Milei have endorsed pushing

him out of office by force.

Trump's bellicose rhetoric in Latin America echoes his language at home, where he denounces Democratic politicians as "left-wing maniacs" and calls those who protest his deportation policies "Antifa militants." Trump has also worked to extirpate the uncomfortable past, forcing historical makeovers in schools, national parks, and cultural institutions—as well as claiming that, three decades after the end of apartheid in South Africa, white Boers are the true victims of racism.

Kast, despite his mild demeanor, has echoed Trump's tough-guy tone. He has called to "make Chile a great country" and said that it needs to be ruled by a "firm hand." His campaign slogan was "The Strength of Change." It is hard to say how far he, and his peers in the region, will go. In Argentina and Peru, right-wing politicians have already pushed to efface human-rights laws in order to free military men imprisoned for crimes against humanity. Daniel Noboa, the President of Ecuador and a Trump ally, summoned the changing ethos in a recent interview with me. "The twenty-first century was based on the concept of social justice," he said. "It worked for a little while, then it became more unjust than before. The core concept became broken. It gave the right an opportunity." Now, he suggested, people just wanted power on their side—"anything that is stricter and stronger against crime and the political class." ♦