

Chilean lower house approves impeachment trial of President Sebastian Piñera

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President Sebastian Pinera faces impeachment and an investigation into possible tax violations and corruption

Santiago de Chile, November 9 (RHC)-- The lower house of Chile's Congress has approved the impeachment trial of President Sebastian Piñera over corruption allegations stemming from Pandora Papers leaks.

The vote early on Tuesday came after a last-minute effort by opposition members of the chamber, that extended the current session for hours and gave time for one legislator to be released from quarantine to cast his vote. That gave parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies the 78 votes required to seek impeachment and advance proceedings to the Senate, which will act as a jury.

The vote comes less than two weeks before a November 21 general election, in which Chileans will pick a new president following Piñera's two terms in office.

Opposition legislators launched the effort after the Pandora Papers -- a vast trove of reports on the hidden wealth of world leaders researched by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) -- linked Piñera to the \$152 million sale of Dominga, a sprawling copper and iron project, through a company owned by his children, to businessman and close friend of the president, Carlos Delano. The leaks showed a large part of the operation was carried out in the British Virgin Islands.

Legislators quickly accused Piñera, one of the richest people in the country, of using his office for personal financial gain. Chile's public prosecutor, meanwhile, said in October it would open an investigation into possible bribery-related corruption charges, as well as tax violations related to the 2010 sale of the Dominga mine, which took place during Piñera's first term in office.

At particular issue is a controversial clause in the deal that made part of the payment conditional on Chile "not establishing an area of environmental protection in the area of operations of the mining company, as demanded by environmental groups." Such a decision would fall within the remit of the Chilean president.

Piñera has denied any wrongdoing, saying the sale had previously been examined and dismissed by courts in 2017.

On Monday, Jaime Naranjo, a legislator from the Socialist Party of Chile, began reading a lengthy document in the chamber in a ploy to extend the chamber's current session, which was meant to end that evening, according to Bloomberg news. He spoke for about 15 hours, allowing time for another legislator to finish mandatory COVID-19 quarantine and arrive to cast his vote in favor of moving forward with impeachment.

Piñera's popularity has waned amid the coronavirus pandemic and criticism his government took too long to deliver promised economic aid to Chilean families. Protests across the country have continued since 2019 over inequality and the cost of living. Clashes with security forces have resulted in many deaths and thousands of arrests.

Piñera's right-wing coalition, meanwhile, suffered a disastrous defeat in May in a consequential election for a newly created constituent assembly. The ruling coalition won just 37 of the 155 seats on the assembly, which was approved by a popular referendum in October of 2020 and will draft the country's new constitution. That task will now be controlled by an array of left-wing parties.

Piñera's term is set to end in March

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