



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Series: Centers of Government

Interview no.: K 16

Interviewee: Edmundo Perez Yoma

Interviewer: Robert Joyce

Date of Interview: 25 August 2014

Location: Santiago, Chile

JOYCE: Today is August 25th, 2014. My name is Robert Joyce, I'm here in Santiago with Mr. Edmundo Perez Yoma, the former Minister of Interior in the (Michelle) Bachelet administration. Thank you Mr. (Perez) Yoma for speaking with us today. Like we've discussed this an interview about the presidential transition process in Chile. Perhaps we can start with you describing what that process is like and how it has changed over time. You've served in multiple administrations.

The first thing I have to say is that the transition from Bachelet to (Sebastian) was the first time that we switched from one coalition to another. The first transition of course was from (Augusto) Pinochet.

JOYCE: Right much

PEREZ YOMA: *Afterwards we had twenty years with no changes of coalition. The transitions were very easy. We didn't have any problems. We didn't make any protocol for switching from one to the other because in the end it was all the same coalition*

However the change from Bachelet to Piñera presented a difficulty in that it wasn't really expected that the change was going to happen, it was sort of expected that this can happen, but it wasn't quite expected to change.

I had, in some press interviews, said that we had to be prepared to win or lose. We at the Ministry of Interior were aware that there was a possibility that we wouldn't win. Our campaign very good and the polls indicated that the race would be close, but we actually didn't do anything formal to prepare ourselves for that.

After the first round of elections, we started preparing for a possible transfer. We immediately issued a set of instructions. The first instruction was that we were going to be in charge until the last day. That was the main headline.

Second, that from now on there was to be no more hiring and replacements by officials in the government. Third, that no more contracts, employment contracts, should not be changed, no increases in salaries, no additional contracts either by fees or by long term contracts so as to avoid any criticism that we were trying to leave our people all over the place.

Thirdly we insisted that each ministry should wait for Mr. Piñera to appoint his team. Once his team was appointed and consolidated, we would start meetings minister to minister, acting minister to designated minister. These meetings should be as formal as possible. The new ministers should receive complete folders, everything. Not so much of what we had done, but mostly for what was in process; legislation in process, studies made, full account of what had been done and what was to be done.

We tried to convince every minister to just be as formal as possible, to say this is the actual state of things. These are the things that we are going to do from here until March 11th and laws pending in Congress. These instructions were given by me and I had a lot of meetings with different ministers to explain in detail what we wanted—many of them were very compliant and some of them were not too convinced but they all cooperated. It was very important that we were to spend the proportionate amount of money from January to March, not over execute the budget or under execute the budget.

I think those were the main instructions.

JOYCE: As Minister of the Interior, what is your formal role in the transition process?

PEREZ YOMA: The post of Interior Minister in Chile is a very complex one and depends very much on the person who is the minister. Some ministers of the interior focus all their work on security, criminality, police work. Others are more focused on politics, actually acting as the head of the cabinet. I was asked by President Bachelet to be the latter, the head of the cabinet. As such I had the authority, moral, not only formal authority to intervene with all the ministers.

JOYCE: So it was under this authority that you can issue instructions on the transition?

PEREZ YOMA: Yes.

JOYCE: When the planning process started to leave office, I suspect around the first round of elections, what did you think the main challenges would be to prepare your administration to leave?

PEREZ: My main challenge was that we should be as transparent as possible. We should be open with the new government but at the same time make it clear to them that we were not going to co-govern. We were going to be in charge of the country until the morning of March 11th. This is what I conveyed to the ministers of Piñera, to Mr. Piñera himself and to our people.

JOYCE: In your view, what are the responsibilities of an outgoing government to the incoming government?

PEREZ YOMA: To make the transition as easy as possible for the new government.

JOYCE: Did political tensions make this process more difficult? The election was very close in 2010; it is a new right-wing coalition coming in.

PEREZ YOMA: Not really. I suppose that in some ministries there could have been tensions because of personalities, personality conflicts. But in general it was kind of an easy process because the ministers designated by Mr. Piñera had no government experience at all so they were very eager to learn. They were very eager to be in charge as soon as possible and you could notice that for them being in government was very new to them. Many times they would seek for advice, which we were glad to give to them.

JOYCE: When you—how did you draft these instructions that you gave? Did you look at previous examples? Did you look at other countries? How did you—?

PEREZ YOMA: No.

JOYCE: How did you decide what these instructions were to be?

PEREZ YOMA: They were common sense; they were just common sense instructions.

MARKOWITZ: And Mrs. Bachelet said, you do whatever you think is right?

PEREZ YOMA: She agreed completely—she liked the process. I knew I was not running on my own; I had the full support of the President. We wanted to make a good example of the transition; that the opposition should not have the problems we had when we inherited the government from the Pinochet regime. There were many; it was very difficult.

JOYCE: Could you explain how that experience in 1990 possibly influenced how transitions worked afterward?

PEREZ YOMA: I have no direct experience with that process; I wasn't there. The big problem was that Mr. Pinochet drafted—I don't know how many—last minute executive orders. I don't know how many last-minute laws that left us the most tied-up possible. Everything was kind of bound up. It was very difficult to fire people and he had planted all these people in different places right at the end and we couldn't get rid of them. So it was a totally distinct process. .

For example, in the municipalities, he passed a law that nobody could be fired in any of them, until now. There are still people working in the municipalities that are from the Pinochet regime. Every municipal employee was, by law, impossible to fire. That is one example of many.

JOYCE: How was the process of preparing to leave office in 2010 different than if Concertacion had won?

PEREZ YOMA: How was it different? Before we go into that question, this process, the transition process in 2010 was going very smoothly, no problems, we had no conflicts. Most of the small things were resolved. If there was some problem they would come to me and we would try to resolve it. But one of the main instructions, I didn't want to have too many meetings. I didn't want the new minister to be at the ministry for weeks. My recommendation was to give them as many meetings as they wanted but schedule with an agenda to avoid all the possibilities of co-government

This went very smoothly until the earthquake. From the earthquake on, this process was almost completely paralyzed. In Chile, earthquakes are very often and we always name them by the location where they occurred, the Valdivia earthquake, the Tocopilla earthquake or the Valparaiso earthquake or whatever. This one was so big, and covered such an extension of the country that we couldn't call it any name like that, we had to call it 27F, it was strong in Santiago, strong in Chillán, it was strong in Talcahuano, in Concepcion, —from Santiago to Talcahuano, the most populated area of Chile. So there was no way to do anything but this—all the efforts, our efforts, were to keep the country going, avoid looting, restore public services li water electricity, etc.

This continued because the earthquake kept generating aftershocks—all the way to the inauguration day. That day, I was sitting between the President of Argentina and Prince Philip of Spain and the whole building was shaking. I heard some dignitaries saying, "What the hell is going on? What are we doing here?". This was the kind of problems we were facing. The transition period in the last stage this process was completely—I don't know if completely, but almost completely disrupted by this.

JOYCE: By the earthquake.

PEREZ YOMA: At that time I wanted to have all our people working on the pressing issues brought to us by the earthquake—health minister worried about health issues public works minister on fallen bridges and so on.

JOYCE: Before the earthquake?

PEREZ YOMA: Before the earthquake it was very smooth.

JOYCE: The things that were happening, the meetings that were going on, your instructions—what would your instructions have been if Mr. (Eduardo) Frei (Ruiz-Tagle) had won for example?

PEREZ YOMA: None.

JOYCE: None, so how would it have—you were involved in previous transitions.

PEREZ YOMA: Sure, I was Minister of Defense in 1994 with Mr. Frei. I was with Mr. Frei the whole six years. There was an interlude of a year that I went to Argentina as an ambassador. Then from Mr. Frei to Mr. (Ricardo) Lagos, the person who came after me was my chief of staff, The transition within the coalition was different.

JOYCE: And you would informally—

PEREZ YOMA: Informally. The same from Lagos to Bachelet. . So the first time we really had to do all this was in 2010.

JOYCE: In 2010. You mentioned some small sort of problems would come up and be resolved during this process.

PEREZ YOMA: I don't remember—they were very small, no problems.

MARKOWITZ: How did you—because you said that some ministers weren't too convinced.

PEREZ: I don't know if that is the right expression but some of them, they knew they had to do it but had different attitudes—people were different and from different parties. You have radicals, socialists, Social Democrats, different personalities. Some of them were too open and others were too closed. It was no more than that.

JOYCE: So how did you convince these more closed people that it was a good idea to work with the Piñera administration?

PEREZ YOMA: I told them that if we didn't do that, we would have to spend the first six months resisting attacks from the new minister. That he wasn't informed of this, he wasn't informed of that, that this happened because we didn't give him enough information, that he found the ministry full of surprises. My main argument was telling them, look it is in your benefit to tell them everything, to avoid that the new minister can have any excuse by saying "well look this surprised me, I wasn't expecting this".

JOYCE: Were these—these were briefings prepared in a book and handed to the new minister?

PEREZ YOMA: Right. In some ministries there were volumes.

JOYCE: You personally handed something over to—

PEREZ YOMA: Very little.

JOYCE: Very little?

PEREZ YOMA: Of course there is the security department, immigration department, the specific—the ministry is very big here. But on the political side I had a good rapport with the minister who was going to replace me. So we talked. He came to my house a couple of times and we talked a lot. But the specifics, immigration, security department etc, was handled by the heads of department.

JOYCE: From what you know, what were these meetings like with the incoming Piñera ministers? Were they cordial?

PEREZ YOMA: They were mostly cordial. I don't remember anybody telling me that they had had a clash. Mainly I think because of the eagerness of the new ministers. They really were very surprised that they had won, were very surprised that they were going to be in charge of the government. They were just very eager to receive all the information, whatever you could tell them.

JOYCE: Was there any sort of—maybe not at the minister level but with the lower levels of staff?

PEREZ YOMA: Probably so.

JOYCE: What makes you say that?

PEREZ YOMA: Just common sense, probably so. It was never reported to me anything like that.

JOYCE: But it probably happened?

PEREZ YOMA: Probably happened yes. Especially the lower level, the more they had problems.

JOYCE: Is that for political reasons would you say?

PEREZ YOMA: Yes.

JOYCE: They didn't want to work with the new right-wing coalition?

PEREZ YOMA: And they were also, many of them, very worried to be accused of collaboration, too much collaboration. On the other hand, some were trying to congregate themselves to the new government. So they had that duality. They had to show themselves, that they were different. At the same time—some of them I think wanted to stay.

JOYCE: Right. From the top levels how do you manage those sorts of tensions?

PEREZ YOMA: I didn't. The instructions were very clear; they knew that if we would be aware of that, we would sanction them. So everything was kept quiet. Nobody was interested in escalating any conflicts.

JOYCE: Right, okay. Do you think you found any challenges in getting your staff, and getting the staff at the ministries, other ministries, to follow these instructions? I mean you're heading out of government, they probably won't have a job in a couple of weeks with you. How do you get them to follow your orders?

PEREZ YOMA: Persuasion. The President was very clear on that point. We had cabinet meetings, there were instructions, the President was clear. I was in charge to make them clearer to the ministers. I knew which ministers would be a bit more reluctant so I would talk to them a little bit more, asked them how things were going. Actually there was no major conflict that I can remember.

JOYCE: Right.

PEREZ YOMA: But probably at the lower level yes. That wouldn't surprise me.

JOYCE: Besides the earthquake, was there anything that you didn't expect that would be a problem that came up as a problem?

PEREZ YOMA: Not really. The attitude of Piñera at that time was cooperative, actually trying to keep as many of our people as possible. They said, "Well, of course we are going to get rid of many, but there are some guys that are necessary for the new government to keep". So I don't think there was a big threat to people before the inception of Piñera. That changed very early afterwards. But before Piñera's assumption that wasn't the case. Piñera didn't say, "Well, now I'm going to change this is a new government and I am going to erase everything. He didn't say that. So in that sense, he was a part of the solution—you have to give him credit for not creating artificially a tense environment before his assumption.

But unfortunately, very soon afterwards, that changed

JOYCE: Right.

JOYCE: Was there a tension within the government and within the coalition maybe to persuade people to not stay with Piñera?

PEREZ YOMA: There were both things. We didn't want—the political parties didn't want any of their most outstanding or the most well-known to stay in the government. But we knew that there was going to be a lot of unemployed so the political parties were kind of turning a blind eye on the guys who wanted to stay.

JOYCE: Especially at the lower levels.

PEREZ YOMA: Especially at the lower levels.

JOYCE: So from the time the earthquake strikes, it is February 27th, your response—
[interruption].

PEREZ YOMA: Repeat please.

JOYCE: Sure, the earthquake strikes on February 27th, you're immediately working on the response, stopping looting, a whole bunch of processes around the country need to happen. How does the crisis complicate your cooperation with the transition?

PEREZ YOMA: First because Piñera went into an active mode. He wanted to be helpful—he would come in and say, “look this is happening you should do this and you should do that and start”—so we had to kind of cut him off. There were some people in the Army and the Navy, and the Air Force that were already looking towards the new government—it was only few days away, so they were ready when Piñera would call. I noticed that our relations with the armed forces at the time were not the same as before the earthquake.

JOYCE: Really?

PEREZ YOMA: That made some things that happened after the earthquake more difficult.

JOYCE: Were they more hesitant to follow your orders? Did they also want to follow orders from Piñera?

PEREZ YOMA: I would not say that, but the orders had to be issued with great formality. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army was ending his period and was already signed by Piñera to be his Undersecretary for the Armed Forces. So his loyalty was quite divided at that time. But he followed orders.

JOYCE: Did you keep the Piñera administration informed of the response efforts, of what the government was doing to respond?

PEREZ YOMA: None whatsoever.

JOYCE: Why not?

PEREZ YOMA: Because of this. There was too much activism by them. All that they had done up to the earthquake changed after the earthquake—they went into an active mode. They said, “Well, we are going to have to deal with this, we want to know what is going on, we want to act”. It was difficult.

JOYCE: So you would describe relations with the Piñera administration as maybe positive before the earthquake—.

PEREZ YOMA: positive.

JOYCE: And then after?

PEREZ YOMA: Almost nonexistent.

MARKOWITZ: That's interesting.

PEREZ YOMA: Except in the foreign ministry because they had people working, invitation to foreign dignataries all the people who were going to come, the ambassadors, all the things related to the ceremonies and stuff like that.

JOYCE: But you would say in most if not all other ministries—.

PEREZ YOMA: Only the minimum. Mine for example, none.

MARKOWITZ: So prior to the earthquake you were talking with your counterpart often and—?

PEREZ YOMA: Afterwards I kept good relations with Mr Rodrigo Hinzpeter.—but at that time , I was working 20 hours a day, I wasn't available to talk about anything that did not have direct relation with the problems brought to us by the earthquake.

JOYCE: Right.

PEREZ YOMA: I hardly had time to sleep.

JOYCE: Part of the transition process in Chile is that the under secretary of interior takes office before the rest of the government?

PEREZ YOMA: Right.

JOYCE: How did that process start? How did that evolve?

PEREZ YOMA: That is a long-time tradition, we did it even in the Pinochet regime—it is amazing. The day before—.

JOYCE: It is only the day before?

PEREZ YOMA: Only the day before. Just so—because you're sworn into office during the inauguration ceremony and the official who receives your oath is the undersecretary. That is the reason for it.

MARKOWITZ: So it's not because he starts working right away?

PEREZ YOMA: No.

MARKOWITZ It is just to be able to have the new person to swear in the new people?

PEREZ YOMA: Yet theoretically he is part of the last government and has all the authority over the police and everything.

JOYCE: Did this person, when this person came in, the new undersecretary; was he given briefings on the recovery efforts, on what was going on?

PEREZ YOMA: Yes, about everything concerning security. At the time, he came we had a lot of things for him to do. He was going to be in charge of security, since the day he was there. We had a protocol meeting when he arrived and then he worked with the permanent staff

JOYCE: Your undersecretary at the time was Mr. Rosende? Did you give him instructions to cooperate?

PEREZ YOMA: Oh yes. This tradition has always worked well, even under Pinochet. I don't know why but it just works.

JOYCE: It just works well. Can you explain what happens on inauguration day? You work right up until the last moment or do you stop before or what happened in 2010?

PEREZ YOMA: *The tradition here is that you leave your office the day before; these things usually are in the morning. You have to go to Valparaiso because the seat of the Congress is at Valparaiso. So you go to La Moneda in the morning, take the last picture of the cabinet members with the president, things like that. Then you drive all the way to Valparaiso. The ministers go first and wait for the arrival of the president inside the Congress. The President arrives with the Minister of the Interior, which was I in this case. A couple of blocks before the president changes from the car that brought her to Valparaiso, to an open chariot to receive honors from the armed forces. While we were in the chariot going to the Congress, in the final stage there was another aftershock—it was 7 or so degrees. Then another one when we were inside.*

The ceremony is simple. The outgoing President gives the symbols of power to the elected President. The outgoing president leaves the congress accompanied by her ministers. The new President with the undersecretary of the interior proceeds to take the oath of the new ministers. The old ministers go out. Some of them, a little populist, would take a taxi home. Some had their wife to drive them home and some have their chauffeurs bring them home. That is the process, no more.

JOYCE: And the new minister comes in. In this case there is an ongoing crisis going on. Piñera—there was a scene where Piñera instructs his Minister of Interior to go out because there is another aftershock in the building and he tells his minister to go out and deal with the earthquake. How does that—?

PEREZ YOMA: *That is the start of the Piñera style, doing a lot of things that we're not used to.*

JOYCE: You issued your instructions on how to leave office for everyone. Would you have called—would you describe your instructions in that process as a success?

PEREZ YOMA: *Yes, very much so.*

JOYCE: By what criteria would you judge that?

PEREZ YOMA: *Because nothing that we feared that would happen, happened. They couldn't say. We didn't know that, we found that they have overspent or we found that this thing that they told us was there, was not, by that criteria.*

JOYCE: So none of the—.

MARKOWITZ: No surprises.

PEREZ YOMA: *No surprises.*

MARKOWITZ: Can I go back to the earthquake for one more second?

PEREZ YOMA: Sure.

MARKOWITZ: I'm sure that Chile is very good at dealing with earthquakes and you have lots of protocols and things like that for when there is a big emergency. So you were

saying that you were working twenty hours a day, barely had time to sleep. Does the government bring in any extra people when there is a [Indecipherable] like this and were there any people from the new government who sort of came in to help with emergency management, emergency relief stuff?

PEREZ YOMA: No. We didn't bring in extra people. We were only 12 days away from the change of government

JOYCE: It doesn't work that well. So when President Bachelet left office she was very popular, high popularity.

PEREZ YOMA: Around 80%.

JOYCE: That's very popular.

MARKOWITZ: I don't think we've ever had that.

JOYCE: So on the day that Piñera is taking office they're already talking about President Bachelet running again and she did and she won. Was Mrs. Bachelet's popularity and possibly her political future a factor in the transition?

PEREZ YOMA: That's a good question. I think Bachelet's popularity helped because there was a sensation that the Piñera government was going to be a one time only, that we were not going to have two or three right-wing governments, and that Mr. Piñera was an exception. I think in that sense it worked like that. So this made it so that the outgoing government didn't feel that it was that bad that they were leaving power, it was just a parenthesis in their continued rule.

JOYCE: And that would make it easier to prepare to hand government over right? You can tell a minister listen, just prepare these books and we'll be back in a couple of years.

PEREZ YOMA: That's what I said when I left, exactly. When I left the ministry, I said please keep, take care of this place, we are coming back in four years.

JOYCE: Okay.

MARKOWITZ: On that note different people have told us different things. What you were saying is that is that it is in our interest to make a really good transition because we don't want the new government to be attacking us and saying they did this, they did that and they did this.

PEREZ YOMA: Right.

MARKOWITZ: Some other people have said, no, the best interest was less about an attacking thing, less to prevent attacks, then because it was as a public servant you were serving democracy and this is, the change of power is evidence of a healthy and mature democracy.

JOYCE: Both things.

MARKOWITZ: Then the third thing we've heard is what you just said and we've heard that from other people too, we'll be coming back so we have to leave everything in order.

PEREZ YOMA: *That worked, we want to have the same process when we came back*

MARKOWITZ: Do you think any of those three things were primary or do you think they were all about the same?

PEREZ YOMA: *They were all the same.*

JOYCE: You said it is also because we want the same process, we want them to treat us like that when we come back to take office. Obviously we're sitting here, you're not in government right now, but from what you know, was this past transition in 2014 as well-handled as how you managed it?

PEREZ YOMA: *I think it was. Some ministers complained, but I think in the long term it was quite good. There was a lot of complaining at first but mostly if you think about it they're complaining of bad management. It was not that the transition was bad, necessarily bad.*

JOYCE: This time it was handed by the Ministry of the Secretary-General of the Presidency rather than the Interior?

PEREZ YOMA: I don't know.

JOYCE: Okay.

PEREZ YOMA: *In Piñera's government, nobody handled anything except Piñera.*

JOYCE: Okay.

PEREZ YOMA: *He was omnipresent.*

JOYCE: So like I mentioned at the beginning, a large part of these interviews is to help other countries build their own processes and their own institutions. Knowing what you know now about how the transition worked out, is there anything that you would have done differently given the exact same circumstances, a right-wing coalition coming in, a major national crisis, the earthquake. Is there anything that you would have changed from what you did in 2010?

JOYCE: From those instructions that you gave and the meetings you held and the things you did to manage the transition, is there anything that you would have done differently?

PEREZ YOMA: *No.*

JOYCE: What advice would you give to a Minister of Interior facing a transition similar to the one that you handled?

PEREZ YOMA: *I think it is the best is for them to be as transparent as possible because in this age and time to try to hide things or obscure them, it just doesn't work. It works maybe for a couple of months but then sooner or later the facts are known—the best thing is to say this is what is going on here, the problems that we face are*

this or that. Because if not, the person who replaces you might say, look I found myself in a crisis, nobody told me anything, they were hiding this from the country etc.

JOYCE: Do you have any advice you would give to another country—you've served in multiple governments, you have a long experience, would you have any advice to another country trying to build up these processes and trying to build a political culture in which you hand power over respectfully.

MARKOWITZ: For example, I live in El Salvador, we had an election a few months ago and it was very—nobody was nice to each other. It was very bad and I think nobody is working together now. So what sort of advice would you give to build rapport?

PEREZ YOMA: I think what you have to do is to really make an effort to think not about your interests but of the interests of the country. I'll keep saying that over and over and over again. We can have maybe partial success in sticking strictly to our point of view but in the end what will really make the difference to your country will be trying to reach a consensus over your policies. We lost, politics is about winning and losing, so this time it was our time to lose but the country has to go on. Let's make it as less painful for this transition to be. That would be my only advice. You have to keep that in mind all the time because sometimes you get incensed.

MARKOWITZ: Calm down.

PEREZ YOMA: Because in the end that would be an abstraction. We want the country to continue growing.

JOYCE: Right. We've heard in lots of interviews this sort of sense, of collaboration, that you have to work together for the country's interests. Why do you think that sentiment is so strong in Chile? Why do you think it works so well here?

PEREZ YOMA: The (Salvador) Allende trauma.

JOYCE: Could you explain what you mean by that?

PEREZ YOMA: I thought it was self—.

JOYCE: Not for everyone who will read this interview. Can you explain what you mean?

PEREZ YOMA: The Allende government tried to push a program of very radical transformation with a minority. No efforts were made to reach agreements on any issues. Their main motto was "avanzar sin transar" to go ahead with their program without any transactions with the opposition. This created a huge polarization of the country that eventually led to a military coup led by Pinochet with all the terrible consequences that it brought to the Chilean democracy and for its people.

The country knows by experience that political struggle without compromise ends badly.

JOYCE: So Chile rewards this cooperation politically?

PEREZ YOMA: It rewards cooperation between politicians.

MARKOWITZ: Do you think the young people are going to assimilate that attitude?

PEREZ YOMA: That we will have to see, but up to now yes. Some of them of course no but we have had always anarchists groups. There's always been, in every government, a very left-wing anarchist group operating in Chile, always. It goes up and down, but it is always there.

JOYCE: But the majority—

PEREZ YOMA: The majority will reward political compromise.

JOYCE: I think that's all we have for you.

MARKOWITZ: That was amazing, thank you.

JOYCE: Thank you very much for speaking with us.