The 'Emergency Government': Kast's First 100 Days

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Kast's 'Emergency Government': Chile's First 100 Days Under the 'New Right'

The path that carried José Antonio Kast Rist to La Moneda was neither smooth nor predetermined. The 16 November 2025 first round produced one of the most fragmented results since the return to democracy, with Jeannette Jara of the Communist Party leading on 26.75% and Kast close behind on 23.96%, while the populist outsider Franco Parisi took a startling 19.80% (BioBioChile, 2025a). Behind them came the libertarian Johannes Kaiser and the long-time Chile Vamos frontrunner Evelyn Matthei, whose collapse confirmed the implosion of the traditional centre-right. In the concurrent parliamentary contest the two right-wing pacts together won 76 of the 155 seats in the Chamber of Deputies—two short of a simple majority, with Kast's Republicans emerging as the single largest bloc on 31 seats—

while the Senate split evenly, leaving the incoming government without a guaranteed legislative majority in either chamber (Diario Financiero, 2025).

Two structural forces then made Kast the runoff favourite. The first was the return of the compulsory voting mechanism (transl. 'voto obligatorio'), which drew roughly 5.1 million less-politicised voters—many preoccupied with insecurity and migration—into the electorate (BioBioChile, 2025b). This was a less party-loyal public, moved by concrete grievances rather than ideological attachment, and it broke decisively against the incumbent left. The second was the 'Parisi Factor' (transl. 'factor Parisi'): although Parisi himself urged a null vote, Unholster's Decide Chile model found that 55% of his first-round backers ultimately chose Kast, against just 34% for Jara, while Kaiser's libertarians transferred almost wholesale (La Tercera & Pulso, 2025). On 14 December, Kast won 58.17% to Jara's 41.83%, taking all sixteen regions and the largest right-wing vote in Chilean history (Servicio Electoral de Chile, 2025). His strongest margins came from two distinct geographies that together encapsulated his mandate: the conservative south-central heartland and the northern border regions hit hardest by irregular migration.

What remained conspicuously absent was detail – if not LOTS of detail. Between the electoral victory and his 20 January cabinet announcement, Kast spoke only broadly of security, health, education and housing, prompting José Joaquín Brunner to warn that the emergency-government framing functioned as somewhat of a 'Trojan horse', masking a values-based agenda behind the palatable language of public-safety urgency—what he called 'the mirage of moderation' (transl. 'el espejismo de la moderación') (Brunner, 2025). Policy substance leaked out only in fragments during the transition, leaving the question of what the government actually intended as the central empirical puzzle of its opening months. This briefing tests that diagnosis across the government's opening hundred days — from the cabinet (II), through the security, migration and fiscal agenda that showed the emergency method at work (III–IV), to the environmental backlash, the 19 May reshuffle and the June re-declaration of emergency where it began to strain (V–VII), before asking in closing whether the 'Trojan horse' or the logic of diminishing returns is the better reading (VIII).

Announced on 20 January 2026, the Kast cabinet was read across the Chilean press as a deliberate departure from the ideological profile of his earlier campaigns. Two-thirds of the ministers were independents and the average age was 54, a striking under-representation of the Republican Party itself and of the Chile Vamos coalition that had backed him in the runoff (Emol, 2026). The economic ministries formed the most coherent bloc, anchored by Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz, the ultraliberal economist who had coordinated Kast's campaign economic programme and was cast as the brain of the team, alongside a foreign ministry handed to a corporate executive with no diplomatic background in an explicit bid to attract investment (France 24, 2026).

Two appointments, however, proved somewhat "politically combustible". The defence and justice portfolios went to Fernando Barros and Fernando Rabat respectively, both lawyers who had formed part of the legal teams that defended Augusto Pinochet—Barros during the dictator's 1998 London detention, Rabat through the firm that represented him in the Riggs case (BioBioChile, 2026; CRHoy, 2026). In a country whose recent constitutional convulsions were structured in part around the unresolved legacies of the 1973–1990 dictatorship, placing Pinochet's former counsel over the ministries responsible for the armed forces and for human-rights policy crystallised a recurring critique: that the administration intended not merely to govern from the right but to re-litigate the terms of Chile's democratic transition. Robert L. Funk characterised the broader team as resembling a board of directors more than a conventional political cabinet—a strategy of recruiting technocrats and executives to project competence, but one that left the government thin on the political operators needed to manage Congress (Funk, 2026).

Once in office, Kast moved fast and visibly. The flagship 'Implacable Plan' (transl. 'Plan Implacable') against organised crime drew openly on Nayib Bukele's model, following Kast's January visit to El Salvador's CECOT mega-prison (Funk, 2026). Its components included maximum-security prisons, isolation regimes for narco-trafficking leaders, and enhanced legal protection for police and prosecutors. Yet the plan faced a structural mismatch between rhetoric and reality, since Chile's homicide rate remains comparatively low by regional standards, so the gap between subjective fear and objective crime statistics complicates the political payoff of even effective enforcement.

Migration policy was pursued with equal visibility. The Border Shield Plan (transl. 'Plan Escudo Fronterizo') brought trenches, drones and troops to the three northern regions and suspended a Boric-era decree that would have regularised some 182,000 migrants (MercoPress, 2026). The government paired this with bills to criminalise irregular entry—currently only an administrative infraction—and to penalise those who facilitate it. The first deportation flight, on 16 April, returned just 40 people to Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador (Colombia One, 2026), a modest figure against a campaign pledge to expel the roughly 300,000 living in the country without legal status, and one that foreshadowed the diplomatic difficulty of removing Venezuelans—the largest undocumented group—to a state with which Santiago de Chile maintains no functioning relations.

If the security and migration agenda showed the emergency method at its most effective, fiscal policy was where it first turned costly — the opening case of a pattern this briefing traces throughout: decree-driven speed generating political liabilities as fast as it projects resolve. Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz ordered a roughly US$3.8 billion adjustment, instructing each ministry to absorb permanent spending cuts, and tabled a corporate tax cut from 27% to 23% (Ex-Ante, 2026). The framing was one of unavoidable

consolidation rather than ideological preference, an attempt to reassure the business community that had rallied to his candidacy. The political cost, however, arrived early. The partial dismantling, by decree, of the MEPCO fuel-price stabilisation mechanism threatened pump-price increases of up to 54% and cost Kast six approval points within his second week (La Tercera, 2026a). The government scrambled to contain the damage with a relief package that froze public-transport fares and lowered kerosene prices — but the episode had already shown how the same method that delivered visible wins on security could manufacture a self-inflicted wound on the economy. It was here, too, that the economy began its displacement of security as the public's leading concern — the shift that would define the 19 May reshuffle.

The environment, an arena the campaign had all but ignored, drew the sharpest criticism. On 12 March, his first full day in office, the government withdrew more than forty environmental decrees from legal validation, among them six new Atacama protected areas meant to shield high-altitude wetlands under the previous lithium strategy (Fundación Terram, 2026). Several of these measures had taken years to prepare and had already passed through indigenous consultation and public participation, so their withdrawal in a single administrative act read, to critics, as a statement of priorities: clearing regulatory ground for mineral investment at the expense of conservation commitments built under Boric. The reaction from Chile's scientific community was pointed. Researchers warned that the salt-flat ecosystems were being left exposed to the expansion of lithium extraction, and by late May they had escalated the matter internationally, warning in Science that the country's environmental policy was at risk (Publimetro Chile, 2026). The episode captured the tension running through the entire agenda: the same deregulatory drive that promised investors faster access to critical minerals dismantled the safeguards designed to make that extraction sustainable, and it did so in the one policy area where Kast had offered voters the least forewarning.

These pressures converged on 19 May, when—just 69 days in—Kast dismissed Security Minister Trinidad Steinert and Spokesperson Mara Sedini, the fastest reshuffle since 1990, which Diario Financiero called an early shift of the rudder (transl. 'un golpe de timón temprano') (Diario Financiero, 2026). Three pressures had converged. Approval had fallen to 36% on Cadem and 29.1% on Pulso Ciudadano; more strategically damaging, the economy had displaced security as the public's leading concern, inverting the very framing that had elected him; and criticism had begun to surface from within the governing coalition itself, with traditional right-wing allies signalling that the Republican Party's outsider picks were underperforming politically.

The 19 May reshuffle, then, reads less as a course correction than as an acceleration of the original logic: the same mandate that delivered Kast to La Moneda is now consuming the ministers who fail to deliver it visibly. The

next ninety days will test whether Chile's institutional resilience—its courts, its Comptroller General (transl. 'Contraloría General de la República'), a hostile-leaning Senate—holds, or whether, as elsewhere in the region, emergency framings prove self-perpetuating.

By mid-June the governing pattern of the first hundred days had not broken so much as hardened: where the outgoing Boric administration had met falling approval with cabinet broadening and negotiated retreat, Kast met it by accelerating the same emergency agenda that was costing him support — decree-driven, security-first, and unwilling to recalibrate. On 1 June, Kast delivered his first Cuenta Pública (transl. 'Public Account') before a joint session of Congress, structuring his 82-day balance around what he called three simultaneous emergencies—of security, of the economy, and of the social fabric—and pledging that Chile could be governed differently: quickly, but without losing rigour (Infobae, 2026). The speech doubled down rather than recalibrated. He announced a rationalisation of the state through ministry mergers, a Plan Retorno (transl. 'Return Plan') to incentivise the departure of irregular migrants, a prison-infrastructure programme targeting more than 20,000 new places by 2030, and a National Registry of Vandals and Incivilities tying social benefits to clean records (El Dínamo, 2026).

The public verdict was telling. Cadem registered an approval bump to 41%, Kast's best level in six weeks, yet only 50% rated the address itself positively—the weakest reception for a first Cuenta Pública since the pollster began the measurement, and thirteen points below Boric's equivalent in 2022 (La Tercera, 2026b). The recovery, in other words, owed more to the perception that Kast was acting decisively on unpopular fronts than to enthusiasm for what he had actually said. The same surveys continued to show the tax reform and the corporate-rate cut as the leading drivers of his disapproval.

The legislative test, meanwhile, moved to its harder chamber. On 2 June the megareform entered the Senate after surviving an intense debate in the Chamber of Deputies, opening a phase of complex negotiation on which, by the government's own admission, its growth targets directly depend (Cámara Aduanera de Chile, 2026). And on 7 June, during a tour of the northern border, Kast presented two further migration bills—one extending the detention of migrants awaiting expulsion, the other criminalising those who transport irregular entrants—reaffirming that the issue which carried his campaign would remain the spine of his agenda (T13, 2026).

Officially over a hundred days in, the question posed at the outset—whether Kast can convert the largest right-wing mandate in Chilean history into durable structural change—remains genuinely open, but the shape of that answer is still ongoing. The administration has shown beyond dispute that it can act: the trenches were dug, the decrees signed, the megareform filed and pushed through one chamber, and the agenda set persistently on the terrain of security, migration, and fiscal consolidation that Kast chose.

What it has not shown is that speed converts into delivery, with the deportation figures falling far short of the campaign's promises, the megareform now facing a Senate where the government commands no majority, and the decree—the decisive instrument of the early months—proving, in the MEPCO episode, capable of generating political cost as fast as it projected resolve.

This is the tension the 19 May reshuffle exposed and June confirmed: Kast's mandate was one of mood and direction, thin on programmatic detail and his technocratic cabinet was built to deliver competence rather than to manage a divided Congress, leaving a government structurally dependent on the very negotiation its emergency framing was meant to transcend —rewarded by the public for decisiveness yet denied its enthusiasm and absorbing cost from scientists, human-rights critics and its own coalition in order to keep moving. Whether that logic proves self-sustaining or self-exhausting will define the next phase and with it whether Chile's institutional resilience bends the Kast project toward negotiated reform or whether the emergency, perpetually renewed, becomes the mode of government itself.

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