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Election Brings First Leftist Coalition

by LADB Staff
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Tabare Vazquez handily won Uruguay's Oct. 31 presidential election, taking 50.45% of the vote and eliminating the necessity of a runoff election. Vazquez, the candidate for the Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio (EP-FA), is the first leftist leader to win elections in Uruguay since the 1830s. With his win, Uruguay will integrate more strongly with the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), and Vazquez will join neighboring leaders in forming a "progressive international" of left-leaning presidents, although he has appointed a moderate as his economic minister.

Dr. Vasquez joins progressive presidents club

Oncologist and socialist Vazquez had been strongly favored to win since his strong showing in primary elections in June (see NotiSur, 2004-07-23). Analysts attributed popular dislike for President Jorge Batlle and dissatisfaction with Uruguay's economic stagnation since its 2002 crisis to the defeat of Uruguay's two traditional leading parties. The nation of 3.5 million has not seen significant growth in per capita GDP since 1999, while other major Latin American economies have.

The Corte Electoral reported that Vazquez’s Frente Amplio obtained 1,124,761 votes nationwide. Partido Nacional (Blanco) candidate Jorge Larrañaga, with center-right tendencies, took 764,739 votes (34.3% of the total) while governing party candidate Guillermo Stirling of the Partido Colorado, also center-right, received 231,036 votes (10.36%). The Partido Independiente brought in 41,011 votes (1.5%), the Partido Intransigente 8,572, the Union Civica 4,856, and the Partido Liberal 1,548. The electoral court counted 31,031 blank votes (1.39%) and 21,541 null votes (0.97%), and it reported that 2,229,611 of 2,488,004 qualified voters cast ballots, resulting in a voter turnout of almost 90%. The 50.45% vote Vazquez received took gave him almost 10,000 more votes than necessary to prevent a runoff election between himself and Larrañaga.

Left coalition EP-FA to control both houses of Congress

The EP-FA took 17 of the Senate’s 31 seats, the Partido Nacional 11, and the Partido Colorado three. The EP-FA took 52 of 99 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, one shy of the 53 that had been projected after the first vote tally. A close race in the highly industrialized department of Paysandu, where Jorge Larrañaga was mayor for five years, was first counted as the EP-FA’s with an advantage of 541 votes, but a final count gave the Partido Nacional the seat by 304 votes.

The legislative majority will allow Vazquez to pass laws without having to negotiate with the opposition for support, though it will not give him enough strength to win special votes that constitutionally require a two-thirds or three-fifths majority without making agreements with the opposition. Such votes would include the naming of directors of autonomous entities or public businesses, which are an important part of the country's economic activity. Vazquez was so confident he would get a first-round win that he concluded his campaign a week prior to the vote.
in Buenos Aires, Argentina, encouraging Uruguayans living in Argentina to cross the Rio Plata and come to the ballot boxes.

At ports of entry, flag-waving paisanos enthusiastically greeted returning Uruguayans. The EP-FA brings together a broad spectrum of ideologies, from Christian Democrat to communist, and Vazquez has often evaded questions on specific plans he has for governance when he takes office March 1 of next year.

President Batlle, 77 years old, will resign his post as part of the incoming Senate, even though he was elected in the Oct. 31 election. He announced his plans not to accept the seat Nov. 8 after the Colorados' worst showing at the ballot box in its history. Economics and Finance Minister Isaac Alfie will take the seat in Batlle's stead.

**Leftward regional movement to strengthen MERCOSUR**

MERCOSUR will be a strategic priority for Vazquez, reversing the policy of President Batlle, who chose the US and Mexico, members of NAFTA, over neighboring countries for economic guidance and support. Vazquez said the first trip he would make abroad if elected would be to Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, the other full MERCOSUR members, so they could unite around a common strategy. That will be a strong contrast to the focus of conservative President Batlle, who put a priority on relations with the US and strengthened his friendship with the family of President George W. Bush, while pushing relations with neighboring countries to the rear, even undermining normally strong ties with Argentina and Brazil, which have been hurt by a number of diplomatic rows.

The governments of Uruguay's MERCOSUR partners, meanwhile, have openly reached out to this country's leftist coalition. Center-left Argentine President Nestor Kirchner and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former trade unionist, appeared with Vazquez on the balcony of the Montevideo city hall during the December 2003 MERCOSUR summit.

"The left's arrival to the government will signify a radical change from the current foreign policy of Batlle, which, although it did not break ties with MERCOSUR, did maintain a distance" by taking a go-it-alone attitude in relations with the US and Mexico, says international relations expert Alberto Methol Ferre.

The future "ideological affinity" between the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, which will form a kind of "progressive international" complemented by Presidents Ricardo Lagos in Chile and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, "will be very important" in consolidating MERCOSUR, said political scientist Adolfo Garce. Garce says the Vazquez government will launch an offensive against corruption and the "circuits of power" that have ruled for 20 years, purge the military of remnants of its dictatorial past, and take a proactive stance on human rights questions, as Kirchner has done since he became president of Argentina in May 2003.

Former Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003), who is current head of the committee of representatives to MERCOSUR, called Vazquez an "enthusiast" of regional integration after
meeting with the president-elect about the establishment of the Comunidad Sudamericana. The ten-nation group will be established Dec. 9 in Peru, and the two leaders met in Montevideo Nov. 9 to discuss its creation. "The coming world is not for lone countries but rather for negotiations between regions," said Duhalde after meeting with Vazquez and announcing the imminent creation of the South American community. "It will be a mirror of the European community," said Duhalde.

Observers say Vazquez does not intend to default on Uruguay's debt, which stands about equal to its GDP. During his campaign, he named moderate Daniel Astori as his economics minister, a move intended to calm investors and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to signal intentions of fiscal responsibility. Astori has repeatedly said he plans to "follow the example of Lula," a reference to the market-friendly policies the Brazilian president has pursued.

"It won't be a copy of Brazil, but we also think it is possible to change the country while being prudent in managing public accounts and maintaining stability in monetary and foreign-exchange policy," Sen. Astori said in an interview. "Uruguay is much more vulnerable than Brazil and has a much weaker economy, so we will have to be much more cautious than Brazil."

**Abortion on the ballot?**

Among the domestic possibilities of a Vazquez administration is the reintroduction of abortion legalization to the Uruguayan political landscape. A popular bill to legalize the medical procedure failed the Senate by four votes earlier this year, after narrowly passing the lower house of Congress (see NotiSur, 2004-05-21). During the campaign, Vazquez alluded to the possibility of presenting a referendum to decriminalize abortion. "The issue of reproductive health is important and transcendent, and we think that it has to be settled by Uruguayan society as a whole. It is a good issue on which to consult the citizenry." Asked specifically about holding a referendum, he responded, "Why not, possibly."

Referendum decisively rejects water privatization

The water-privatization process President Batlle began in 2001 (see NotiSur, 2004-09-24) suffered defeat at the ballot boxes Oct. 31. A referendum to declare water services in Uruguay a monopoly of the state passed by 64.5% of the vote, although the measure does not undo private contracts previously conceded under the Batlle regime. Officials from the union of the Obras Sanitarias del Estado promoted the referendum to put facilities and water-exploitation projects in the hands of the state, and the "yes" vote winning by more than 60% exceeded even their expectations.

Uruguay will become the world's first and only country to enshrine the protection of its water in its Constitution and impede its privatization through state policies. The results call on Congress to reform Articles 47 and 188 of the Constitution to establish that water is an essential natural resource for life and access to water and sanitation facilities constitute fundamental human rights.

"Public-sanitation service and the supply of water for human consumption will be provided exclusively and directly by state-authorized people," reads part of the reform. The country has the
second-largest freshwater reserve in the world, the Guarani Aquifer, which Uruguay shares with Argentina and Brazil. Transnational companies have ambitions to exploit it.

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