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Center-left Coalition Consolidates Power in Uruguay

by LADB Staff
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Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez's center-left Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio (EP-FA) won a number of departmental mayoral races in May elections, further consolidating the strength of the coalition that holds the presidency and a majority in the legislature. The vote left the EP-FA in control of the centers that contain 75% of the population and generate 80% of the nation's wealth, including the department of Montevideo, where half of the country's 3 million citizens live. The vote also brought the party's first victory in interior departments, knocking the former ruling parties out of a number of their traditional strongholds.

Eight of 19 intendancies including Montevideo go to EP-FA

Three-quarters of Uruguayan citizens now live in departments that will be governed by EP-FA "intendants" or mayors. The EP-FA, a coalition of 20 heterogeneous leftist parties, counted victory in eight of 19 departments. The party made history last October by becoming the first leftist, nontraditional party to win national control in more than a century and a half of Uruguayan elections (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12, 2005-03-04). That popularity carried over into a May 9 vote that saw the EP-FA gain more ground against the Partido Nacional (Blanco or PN) and the Partido Colorado (PC), the two parties that had alternated in power during prior decades.

The EP-FA has held Montevideo since 1990 and it won its fourth consecutive election there with the victory of scientist and former militant of the Tupamaro movement Ricardo Ehrlich. The 56-year-old Ehrlich won 58.5% of the vote against his Colorado opponent Pedro Bordaberry, who took 25.7%.

In neighboring Canelones, the country's second-most populous department, the Frente knocked out the traditional Colorado hegemony when their candidate, Marcos Carambula, took 61.3% of the vote. The Frente also won in Paysundu and Salto, the two northeastern departments that are the most industrialized and that were important political assets for the Blancos.

In the tourist district of Maldonado, home to Punta del Este and top source of incoming currency for Uruguay, the EP-FA triumphed, although it was the tightest of the races. The EP-FA candidate took 47.4% of the vote against the Blancos' 45.5%. The party also won in Florida, Treinta y Tres, and Rocha.

The wide success for the coalition went beyond even the Frente's most optimistic predictions for the vote. More than 2.5 million voters were required by law to go to the polls to elect intendants and Juntas Departamentales, or 31-members departmental councils. Analysts hoped that the EP-FA triumph would signal greater cooperation between the departmental and national governments, whose relations have been tense in past years.
President Vazquez has set up a meeting with the mayors-elect for May 20 to build better ties. The local control that the EP-FA won consolidates the power of the coalition in the president's office and in the legislature, with the left holding a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Blancos lose ground, Colorados left with one department. The Partido Nacional lost three intendancies, dropping from 13 to 10. The Colorados lost four of the five departments in which they had held office.

Although the two parties have a numerical majority of departments, they are the least populated in the small country and represent the least economic strength, according to Economy Minister Fernando Antia.

The loss of Maldonado hit the Blancos particularly hard. It had been the stronghold of Jorge Larranaga, Vazquez's top opponent in last October's presidential vote and former two-term intendant in the department. The Blancos now occupy the intendancies of Arias, Rio Negro, Soprano, Colonial, San Jose, Cerro Largo, Tacuarembó, Durazno, Flores, and Lavalleja. The Colorados have only Rivera on Uruguay's northwestern border with Brazil. PN candidates had sought to take departments from the weakened PC, but both opposition parties were flattened underneath the EP-FA steamroller.

Conflict regarding allowing presidential re-election

Shortly after the election, Jorge Vazquez, brother to the current president and presidential pro-secretary, caused a controversy by proposing that the Uruguayan president be allowed to run for a second consecutive term. The Uruguayan Constitution permits the chief executive one five-year term, five years that "go by very quickly if one wants to make fundamental changes," says Jorge Vazquez.

Opposition party members including Jorge Larranaga called the proposal "inopportune and untimely." Larranaga, a senator and president of the PN, called the proposal a great error, "especially when it's made by the president's brother." He added, "It is a smokescreen to keep Uruguayan society from seeing that they are not fulfilling campaign promises."

Opposition figures have attacked the EP-FA for saying it would maintain fiscal austerity and control raises for public-employees' salaries as well as investments. In late March Vazquez announced that state employees' salaries would only go up according to inflation, instead of the 25% increase unions were demanding. He also said there would be a 10% reduction in state investments.

"This shows that the EP-FA is one thing in the opposition and another in power," said PC Deputy Jose Amorin. One poll puts Tabare Vazquez's approval rating at 70% since he took office in March.

Former Vice President Luis Hierro of the PC said that a re-election proposal "has the objective of perpetuating the time of the Frente Ample in power. It is a radical change with respect the historic position of the Frente Ample." Hierro pointed to 1971, "when a sector of the Colorado party proposed re-election and there was a tremendous rejection." EP-FA Sen.
Carlos Baraibar said that the information at this point "indicates that Tabare Vazquez disagrees with re-election. When he's been expressly questioned about it, that has been his response." Baraibar said that the matter had been studied, "but the issue of re-election does not form part of the FA tradition." Socialist Sen. Monica Xavier also said that she did not personally support re-election and had not received a formal proposal on the issue.

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