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Uruguayan Political Parties Look Toward 2009 Presidential Elections

by Guest
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Although Uruguay will not elect a new president until Oct. 25, 2009, for the past three months, political parties have been immersed in campaigning as they prepare to choose their party slates. These slates, according to the Constitution, must be determined by internal party elections on the last Sunday in June prior to the presidential elections. For the coming elections, the primaries will be held on June 28, 2009.

Since its creation, in 1971 (see NotiSur, 1991-11-13), the progressive Frente Amplio (FA), currently in power, has always chosen its slate by consensus, without need for a party primary. Through that process, they created an image of unity that none of the other parties could emulate. Now, after four years in power and the toll that has taken, that image has faded. Two pre-candidates are prepared to campaign until the bitter end (in the case of the FA, until the internal election) to run for president in October 2009.

Political commentators and analysts are saying that, to avoid the appearance of division in the FA, a strong possibility is emerging that the Constitution will be amended to allow the re-election of President Tabare Vazquez. They see that as the only way to guarantee party unity.

Vazquez broke traditional parties' lock on power In the 180 years since Uruguay's independence, until Vazquez took office in March 2005 (see NotiSur, 2005-03-04), governance in this small country of 177,410 sq km and 3.4 million inhabitants always alternated between the two traditional parties: the Partido Colorado (PC) and the Partido Blanco (PB or Partido Nacional). They are accustomed to divisions, especially as the parties become older and their leadership structures are not updated, maintaining as their leaders the heirs of those who created the parties in the second quarter of the 19th century.

Now, the PC has four candidates for the party's presidential nomination, and the PB has three running for the nomination. Until 2004, each party could run as many candidates as it wanted, and, at the end of the election, the votes of the different slates were added to the slate that got the most votes. Since 2004, however, election rules require that each party put up only one candidate, chosen in a party primary, and, if none of the candidates receives the necessary 50% plus one, a runoff must be held.
If the primaries were held today, according to recent polls, of the two FA candidates, former minister of livestock, agriculture, and fisheries Jose Mujica would win with almost 50% of the votes, and his opponent, former economy minister Danilo Astori, would receive no more than 37%. Mujica is a former Tupamaro guerrilla who, during the last dictatorship (1973-1985), was brutally tortured and held in abominable prison conditions for 13 years. Astori is an academic who has held prestigious positions in various international organizations. Mujica has the widespread backing of FA members. Astori has the backing of President Vazquez and minority groups.

Independent pollsters say a Mujica-Astori or Astori-Mujica ticket would be nearly unbeatable in 2009 with an edge for Mujica-Astori. However, since neither will relinquish the top position on the ticket, the FA has no option but to hold the long-resisted primary. For the first time, it has no consensus. A grueling campaign is necessary to choose a candidate or, a constitutional amendment must be passed to allow Vazquez to run for re-election.

In the Partido Blanco, Sen. Jorge Larranaga and former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) are fairly even, but Lacalle is climbing in each successive poll. Larranaga is trying to project a progressive image, even appropriating the banners that were historically the FA’s. Lacalle is to the right and offers the choice of a hard-line government. A third Blanco with presidential ambitions is Carmelo Vidalin, a governor without a national following. He will have to be content with looking on from afar or backing one of the other two and becoming, in the end, the kingmaker.

Of the four Partido Colorado candidates, more than half the votes can be counted on to go to Pedro Bordaberry, a young lawyer with ultraright ideas. Bordaberry is the son of ex-dictator Juan Maria Bordaberry (1971-1973), who is now in prison after being convicted of crimes against humanity. Polls focused on the presidential election in October 2009 indicate that, if the vote were held then, the FA would win with 45%, followed by the PN with 36% and the PC with 9%. A small group, the Partido Independiente (PI), would take 2%. The rest are undecided. If a runoff is held and few of the undecideds vote for the FA and all the other parties vote together, the first experiment in progressive government in the history of Uruguay will end on March 1, 2010, the day the new president takes office.

Role of military not what it used to be

The military no longer carry political weight in Uruguay. The brutal dictatorship that they imposed for nearly 13 years discredited them. Today, with minor skirmishes, they answer to civilian authorities. Thanks to a change in official human rights policy, by which Vazquez distinguished himself from his predecessors, several military officers are in prison, are on trial, or have been extradited to Chile and Argentina (although before being extradited, they must first serve their sentences in Uruguay).

Nevertheless, the nostalgia of the dictators lives on in their social clubs, led by officers who were major participants in the administrative apparatus of the dictatorship, even if not directly involved in torture, disappearances, kidnapping of newborn babies, assassinations, and other crimes. These clubs are grouped in an umbrella organization, the Coordinadora de Centros Sociales Militares, comprising the Circulo Militar, the Centro Militar (high-ranking retired officers), the Officers Clubs and Noncommissioned Officers Clubs, and the Air Force Club. Most analysts say the military have
no political influence, but their mere presence brings memories of the worst years and instills fear. "They know it," wrote journalist Roger Rodriguez in a column in the Montevideo daily La Republica.

On Oct. 30, the Coordinadora de Centros Sociales Militares gave some of the national and international media an internal report in which they warned about risks to the continuation of democracy if there were an electoral victory by former guerrilla Mujica or if President Vazquez were re-elected. The report says that a second Vazquez term would have a "totalitarian bent."

Regarding a possible Mujica victory, they warned that "this increase in the power [of the former guerrillas] would mean a real deepening of the changes made by Vazquez but with a marked Tupamaro influence." They cautioned people not to forget that "the Tupamaros are a movement above all of combatants, with a different philosophy from that of regular politicians." They implied, with saying so directly, that their methods were different. Beginnings of re-election efforts Since the beginning of 2007, small staunchly pro-Vazquez sectors have raised the possibility of amending the Constitution to allow the president to run again.

In all instances, the president has been unequivocal. "I don't aspire to or want any re-election," he said in public statements published in all the media. Since September, however, when Mujica's and Astori's ambitions to head the official ticket surfaced, little-known party activists brought up re-election again. They put up posters with the slogan "Tabare 2009" at every public appearance of the president.

In some cases, Vazquez's reaction appeared serious, in others, amused. But since then, he has not repeated his statement that he did not want a second term that is not allowed by the Constitution. And, on Oct. 22, he surprised the country when he voiced his opposition to choosing candidates in party primary elections rather than by consensus as had always occurred, and he said, "If the unity of the FA is in danger, I'm willing to again participate in politics." Tabare, as Uruguayans call him, has not clarified what he meant when he said, "I'm willing to again participate in politics."

Political analysts consulted by the media said that the phrase seems to indicate Vazquez's willingness to continue as president. But for that to happen, the Constitution has to be changed. A constitutional amendment must be approved in a plebiscite, which requires 250,000 signatures (10% of eligible voters).

Backers of such a move say that in two weeks they obtained more than 50,000 signatures. Those signatures include well-known leaders of the Partido Socialista, Vazquez's party, one of the 23 groups that make up the Frente Amplio. There are also four ministers, a third of the Cabinet, all Socialists. And, they all signed publicly on a Monday afternoon. This is interesting because the Cabinet meets on Monday mornings, and no one leaves Cabinet meetings saying or doing anything that has not been cleared with Vazquez. Four years of experience makes that clear.

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