

3-20-2009

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LADB Staff

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## Primary Election Contests Heat Up in Uruguay

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Uruguay

Published: 2009-03-20

On June 28, Uruguayan political parties will choose their candidates for the presidency in simultaneous internal elections. With the date approaching, the campaigns are in full swing and good manners have given way to less polite forms of politicking, discrediting, and personal attacks that were not common at previous similar times in the civic life of this small country with a long democratic tradition.

The campaign is taking place in the last year of the Frente Amplio (FA) government, the first progressive administration in Uruguay's history. The FA's prospect of winning a second term in the Oct. 25 general elections, and with it the expectation that the winner of the primary will be the future president, has aroused ambitions among the more notable FA personalities. Uruguay's Constitution does not allow consecutive re-election of a president.

The constitutional possibility of regaining the power that they held during the country's entire history until 2005 has caused the principal figures in the two traditional parties the Partido Blanco (PB) and the Partido Colorado (PC) to throw themselves into a brutal campaign where anything goes: from winning over small local leaders with ethically and morally dubious offers to "stealing" the top technocrats, who are touted as responsible for designing government programs or as future ministers. Anything goes when the objective is to shock the electorate.

### *New experience for FA*

From every perspective, these are first-time elections for the FA. Although it has existed since 1971, when it was formed by uniting some twenty leftist parties and groups, including the Partido Comunista del Uruguay (PCU) and the Partido Socialista del Uruguay (PSU), this is the first time the party must choose its candidate by going through the wear and tear of an internal election. This is also the first time it must campaign as the party in power, defending the government rather than attacking it.

And, it is the first time that personal ambitions are forcing the party to choose from among three contenders who were unable to come to an agreement. Until now, the FA was the only party that chose its representatives by consensus, that is, with the political and social forces that comprise it engaging in a democratic dialogue. By contrast, for the two traditional parties, the primary is a mere formality. Until 1998, when a constitutional reform required each party to present only one presidential candidate, the law (Ley de Lemas) allowed parties to run as many candidates as they wanted. In each party, the "losing" candidates added their votes to those of the candidates who got the most votes. Public opinion polls have long indicated that only the FA or PB candidate can win in October, and that will be in a runoff.

The enormous cumulative loss of prestige of the last two Colorado administrations [Julio Maria Sanguinetti (1995-2000) and Jorge Batlle (2000-2005)] has meant that, during the five years of government under progressive President Tabare Vazquez, the historic party born in the mid-

nineteenth century has been stuck at barely 7% in voter-preference polls. The electorate has condemned the PC to be an eventual arbiter should the election be settled in a runoff. For the June primaries, the FA has three candidates, while the Blancos have two and the Colorados three.

All the polls indicate the FA winner will be Jose Mujica, former minister of livestock, agriculture, and fisheries and a former Tupamaro guerrilla who spent three years in prison. For the Blancos, former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) and Sen. Jorge Larranaga are tied in the polls. And the Colorado candidate is set to be lawyer Pedro Bordaberry, a large landowner and son of former dictator Juan Maria Bordaberry (1973-1976), now in prison for human rights violations and for his role in carrying out various crimes against humanity.

### *Blancos find support in milk producers*

While the FA finds it difficult, or at least strange, to be in the role of "governing party" and, consequently, to be obliged to unconditionally defend the administration of Tabare, as he is known locally and even in the press around the continent, it is also hard for the Blancos and Colorados to mount a systematic opposition. Although the two traditional parties alternated in running the country, they always had, in effect, coalition governments.

Therefore, although they also alternated as the opposition, since governance was shared, criticism was not strong and systematic but rather seemed to just revolve around different approaches. Because of this "opposition inexperience," the Blancos and Colorados have adopted government criticism that, opinion polls show, has been counterproductive. In February alone, for example, while the legislature was in summer recess and the work of both chambers was done by a Comision Permanente, the opposition formally questioned 10 of the 13 Cabinet ministers. Some, such as Transportation Minister Victor Rossi, had to appear to testify three times, raising the question of whether this was a good exercise of democracy.

What is clear is that the ministers were asked to testify about matters that had little relevance to the functioning of the government from the escape of five adolescents from a reformatory to plans for dealing with a prolonged drought to the advertising costs of an airline company in which the state has a 49% stake. In the last Equipos MORI (British Market and Opinion Research International) poll, carried out the first week in February, Tabare's approval rating was at 61%, the highest at the end of a term of any Uruguayan president since 1985.

The poll also indicated that the FA would win the October election with 44% of the votes, ten points more than the PB and three points more than the combined opposition. In this context, "the opposition is copying the way in which the Argentine opposition is trying to discredit that government," wrote the Montevideo daily La Republica. "Just like [in Argentina], it has placed in the opposition camp the milk producers, who, like the majority of rural producers, are heavily Blanco. Then, although to ease the effects of a prolonged drought, the government has given them tens of millions of dollars in subsidies, the milk producers responded as the opposition did in Argentina, saying that 'the delivery of feed for cattle is a joke,' or that the six-month exemption from paying for electricity used for automatic milking machines is 'absolutely insufficient,' or that giving them a preferential price for fuel for farm machinery 'is more than offensive.'"

Juan Castillo, leader of the union central Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores-Convencion Nacional de Trabajadores (PIT-CNT), said, "In Uruguay, no sector, not even those groups of workers hardest hit by the crisis, has received as much as those milk producers who are so upset."

Mujica, who, as an agricultural worker and former livestock, agriculture, and fisheries minister, knows the rural producers well, was very graphic. With his characteristic direct, down-to-earth language, he said, "If I may be frank, I'll tell them that I am fed up with them. Nobody in this country has received as much as they are receiving. We're talking about people who are ordered around by the Blancos, and since the Blanco leaders are stupid or fools, the arguments they repeat are also stupid or foolish. They don't realize that people, workers in the cities, are no longer willing to be the ones who carry the entire weight of the crisis when these gentlemen receive preferential treatment and make fun of the people saying that what they are given is 'absolutely insufficient.'"

In a near carbon copy of the actions of the Argentine opposition, Blancos and Colorados also turn to a discourse that tries to discredit the official employment, inflation, and growth statistics, although the government Instituto Nacional de Estadisticas (INE) has received the highest international marks for its "transparent procedures of statistics reporting." Despite Uruguay's being considered the safest country in Latin America, Larranaga and Lacalle have held meetings with small neighborhood businesspeople where they have said that "the tremendous insecurity in which we are living calls for a 'zero-tolerance' solution with criminals," and they have talked specifically about the death penalty.

lthough the former Tupamaro guerrillas have shown that, in the 24 years of institutional government since the end of the 1973-1985 dictatorship, no one has had more respect for democratic institutions than they, Gov. Tabare Viera of the northern department of Rivera said, "If Mujica wins, many of us will leave the country to breathe the air of freedom, security, and democracy." "If this is the climate for the primaries, when what is at stake is not the presidency but simply a party candidate, I cannot imagine what this country, which is more democratic than most, will be like in October, when we have to elect the new president. Poor country!" said sociologist and political consultant Agustin Canzani.

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