

6-12-2009

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Primary Elections Could Forecast Major Changes in Uruguay's Political Direction

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Uruguay

Published: 2009-06-12

On June 28, all Uruguayan political parties will hold "internal, primary, and open" elections, as they are constitutionally required to do before they can participate in the general elections (see NotiSur, 2009-03-20). In the primary elections, each party will chose, from a group of hopefuls, a candidate to represent it in the Oct. 25 presidential election.

The process is not unique to Uruguay, but it has its own peculiarities. The vote is internal because, in addition to the presidential candidate, voters elect members of party electoral agencies. It is a primary because, once the field of party hopefuls is narrowed, the winner will go on to the general election, in which those who will govern the country from 2010 to 2015 will be chosen by popular vote. And it is open because all citizens are eligible to vote regardless of whether they belong to a party. The election is convoked by the Corte Electoral, the highest electoral authority.

While internal elections are mandatory for the parties, participation is optional for eligible voters on the Registro Civico Nacional. By contrast, citizens are required to vote in presidential and departmental (general) elections. One particularity of Uruguayan internal elections is that participants do not have to be affiliated with a party. Another is that any candidate for a political party is automatically ineligible to run for any office for another group in the next (2015) presidential or municipal elections. This ineligibility also applies to candidates for positions on either of the two party electoral agencies (Cuerpo Deliberativo Nacional or Cuerpo Deliberativo Departamental).

Thus, the rule penalizes the increasingly frequent practice of politicians switching parties, generally for purely personal motives. In the legislative period that began in March 2005, 13.2% of the 99 members of the Chamber of Deputies "jumped" from one group to another.

Old and new parties vie for support

Participating in the internal elections will be the governing Frente Amplio (FA), the traditional Partido Blanco (PB or Nacional) and Partido Colorado (PC), and the small Partido Independiente (PI), the four groups that presently have parliamentary representation.

While nearly all pollsters and political analysts agree that the October election will be decided between the FA and the PB, they are still unsure about whether the new president will be elected on the first ballot or whether a runoff will be required. They all agree that the FA will comfortably defeat the PB in the first round but perhaps without the 50% plus one required to avoid a runoff, and they are unwilling to risk predicting the outcome of a runoff.

While most projections indicate that, in the end, the new president will be the FA candidate, analysts see this largely depending on who wins the PB primary. From that perspective, June 28 could practically determine who will be the next president of the smallest South American country.

The Partido Colorado has dominated Uruguayan politics for more than a century and a half. In 174 years since independence, this domination was only altered in three PB presidential terms. The Frente Amplio took office for the first time in 2005, when Socialist doctor Tabare Vazquez became president (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12, 2005-03-04). Although internally the Colorados and Blancos include different social sectors, both are essentially conservative.

And although the FA was created through an agreement among the strongest groups of the historical left, including the Partido Socialista de Uruguay (PSU) and the Partido Comunista del Uruguay (PCU), it has evolved into a progressive party. Nevertheless, it maintains excellent relations with Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, with whom it has developed such entities as Telesur, the Union de Naciones Sudamericanas (UNASUR), and the Banco del Sur (the latter two without Cuba, which is not part of the region). The Partido Independiente is insignificant.

Despite its powerful past, the Partido Colorado seems destined for extinction. Since the 2004 elections, its support in polls has stayed steady at 7% of the electorate. In the same polls, the Blancos' support fluctuates between 33% and 35%. The PI is stuck at 1%, but, thanks to a capricious system of distributing congressional seats, it has one deputy for the district of the capital Montevideo.

The FA's support vacillates between 43% and 46% and has been at the higher figure for the past three months. Even a hypothetical unified opposition would not have enough support to defeat the governing FA.

Analysts look at possible opponents

In the June primary, the FA will elect Jose Mujica, formerly one of the most prominent leaders of the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional Tumpamaros, the powerful guerrilla group that operated during the 1960s and 1970s and was wiped out by the bloody dictatorship that ruled between 1973 and 1985.

Of the three candidates, Mujica, who was minister of livestock, agriculture, and fisheries in the Vazquez administration, is leading in all polls by more than 20 points over his nearest rival, former economy minister Danilo Astori.

In the PB, former rightist President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) has a 5 to 10 point lead over centrist Sen. Jorge Larranaga, an advantage that has been increasing with each new poll.

The Colorados' positions have gone from conservative to far right. Pedro Bordaberry has the support of almost 70% of the paltry 7% of voters that the old party still holds on to. He is the son of former dictator Juan Maria Bordaberry (1972-1976), who is in prison after being convicted of crimes against humanity kidnappings, assassinations, and torture. For the Oct. 25 contest, analysts see two possibilities.

While a Mujica victory is almost guaranteed, there is some uncertainty about the outcome of the PB primary, despite little indication that Larranaga could actually defeat Lacalle. So, the possibilities

are: 1) Mujica versus Lacalle, and 2) Mujica versus Larranaga. Many political analysts think that Mujica might win in the first round against Lacalle, while others think the PB would stand a better chance with Larranaga.

However, Larranaga might have recently committed a serious political sin, a grave error, said political analyst Jaime Yaffe. Seeing himself losing, Larranaga asked FA Astori supporters and Colorados backing Bordaberry to vote for him on the 28th. "Astori cannot compete against Mujica, and it's all decided for the Colorados. Come with me, I'm the only possible opposition to Mujica," said Larranaga at various public appearances.

The Astori campaign responded by focusing on criticizing the senator, who until then had not been part of the former economy minister's campaign playbook. The Colorados' reaction was even harsher, because Bordaberry was already concentrating on what his role would be in an eventual runoff. "Larranaga asked us to vote for him, as if [our parties] were the same. What a mistake! Colorados are Colorados, we vote Colorado, and we will always vote Colorado. Or we won't vote," was a typical response.

Analysts say that, if the primaries clearly indicate that the FA is about to capture a second term in office, it could mean a decisive turn in the political history of Uruguay after March 2010. A new five-year period of government could well allow the FA to return to its more leftist roots and move away from its present progressivism.

Mujica and much of the FA leadership agree with this analysis. Moreover, the historical two-party rule of the Colorados and Blancos could definitively disappear to usher in a new two-party era with the FA and the Blancos. Obviously, and thanks to the discredit accumulated in the last two Colorado administrations (Presidents Julio Maria Sanguinetti, 1995-2000, and Jorge Batlle Ibanez, 2000-2005), this could mean the disappearance of the party that almost totally dominated the country's political life for 174 years.

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