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## Uruguayan Presidential Campaign Heats Up Following Primaries

by LADB Staff

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Following the June 28 secret-ballot election of their candidates for the Oct. 25 presidential elections, Uruguayan political parties have begun an all-out campaign effort. The campaign, which began in earnest as soon as the primary winners were confirmed, promises to unfold in ways that are not exactly optimal for laying out differences in candidates' ideas and programs. "Although eight parties will compete four months from now, and, in the democratic contest, all candidates and all efforts are important and deserve the same attention," wrote the daily *La Republica*, "for their electoral import, for the models they propose for the country, and for their profile, some parties and some candidates have a greater relevancy."

Here, what makes the governing Frente Amplio (FA) and its candidate Jose Mujica and the Partido Blanco (PB or Nacional) and its candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle stand out is what they represent and their candidates' personal histories. Mujica, a 74-year-old ex-guerrilla from a humble campesino background, spent 14 years in military prisons during the dictatorship. The 68-year-old Lacalle is a former president (1990-1995), a member of a wealthy family with extensive interests in the agricultural sector.

One of the two is sure to be Uruguay's president from 2010 to 2015. The FA, a leftist group that emerged in 1971, has moved toward progressivism and is the youngest political party in the country. The PB was born as a rebel force in 1836 in the midst of a long civil war, and, along with the Partido Colorado (PC), emerged from those battlefields. Today both represent conservative sectors of Uruguayan society and are tied to powerful national and multinational economic interests.

### *Colorados could be king makers*

Numerous polls released since the beginning of the year indicate that about 50% of the 2.58 million voters intend to support the FA. The PB plus the rest of the opposition groups have the other 50%. Of the other six parties participating in the election, only the PC, with about 7% of voter preference, has any electoral significance; if the FA fails to win in the first round, the PC will play a decisive role for the final outcome. It would undoubtedly add its votes to those of the PB, making it more difficult for the FA to be re-elected. "It's a matter of returning favors.

Since, to defeat the FA in the 2000 runoff election, the Blancos gave the PC their votes, if there is a second round this year, the Colorados will contribute their small but decisive number of votes to the PB's effort to defeat the governing party," political analyst Juan Carlos Doyenart, director of polling firm Interconsult, told the daily *El Pais*.

Local analysts and the national and foreign press agree that the October election will be exceptional. In a definitive break with the bipartisanship that has dominated national politics for 174 years, the

youngest party is seeking re-election after putting the country's first progressive president, Socialist oncologist Tabare Vazquez, in office in 2004. Ten months before his term ends, Vazquez has a 63% approval rating. Since the end of the 1973-1985 dictatorship, Colorados and Blancos have alternated in power, but neither of the two traditional parties ever managed to win a consecutive re-election.

A consecutive FA term would signify an unprecedented show of approval and the definitive consolidation of progressivism. Moreover, the October elections will include two plebiscites with profound conceptual implications (see NotiSur, 2009-01-23). One will determine whether the nearly 600,000 Uruguayans living abroad will have, beginning in 2014, the right to cast an epistolary, or mail-in, vote. The other would annul a 1986 law guaranteeing impunity to members of the military who violated human rights during the dictatorship.

The FA will vote "yes" on both issues. The Blancos and Colorados, however, oppose the epistolary vote because they consider most emigrants to be FA sympathizers. They also oppose annulling the amnesty law (*Ley de Caducidad de la Capacidad Punitiva del Estado*) because it was under a Colorado administration, and with the express support of the Blancos, that impunity was granted to the dictators.

### *Campaigns to discredit all candidates*

The campaign has been in turmoil following the primaries. Since the winners of the FA and PB contests, Mujica and Lacalle, had been widely expected for some time, they were the objects of attacks.

For many, Pedro Bordaberry, winner of the PC primary and, at 49 years of age, the youngest of the presidential candidates, only counts because his support will be decisive for the PB in case of a runoff which would be no small matter. Moreover, at one point, he seemed disqualified by his unconditional defense of his father, ex-President Juan Maria Bordaberry (1972-1976), jailed for crimes against humanity.

The elder Bordaberry was the civilian president who served as a cover for the military-backed coup in 1973 that ended more than a century and a half of democracy. Mujica is discredited for his guerrilla past but even more for his present. In a frivolous and humiliating tone, Radio Nederland's correspondent in Montevideo said that Mujica was "accused of intentionally using 'grammatical mistakes,' of using 'bad words,' of dressing badly and in clothes that were out of style, of going around in an old, dented, and badly painted car, of cultivating an image as a 'filosofo de boliche' (in the Rio Plata slang, someone who frequents bars), in essence, of being an unpresentable character."

In general, the foreign media, especially the Europeans, emphasize this aspect of the campaign. Radio Francia said, "Jose 'Pepe' Mujica is different from any other candidate seen so far. His unkempt and informal appearance, his direct way of speaking, using simple words from the vernacular or even vulgar language, make many doubt that he would be an adequate person to occupy the presidency."

The French newspaper *Le Monde* and the British BBC described Mujica in almost identical terms. What is certain is that "El Pepe," as he is popularly known, is the politician whose image is rated

second only to that of Tabare Vazquez. "For their antidemocratic and prejudicial elitism, I am embarrassed by those types of arguments," university professor Rafael Bayce told the weekly *Caras y Caretas*. "It is superficial and out of place to disqualify someone with great substantive merit and enormous popular support because his physical appearance, his clothing, his means of transportation and grammatical correctness are not the best."

Mujica responded only once to those who have attempted to disqualify him. "We have to think that the world is changing," he said, "when a black person heads the US government, a worker who lost a finger while working on a lathe is president of Brazil, a priest is governing Paraguay, and an Indian, Bolivia. I want them to know that I represent those who come from below and I am proud of it." Lacalle's corruption problem Lacalle is discredited because his administration is popularly identified as the most corrupt in Uruguayan history.

On June 16, in the final days before the internal elections, independent journalist Ignacio Alvarez invited Lacalle to come on his program *Las cosas en su sitio* (Things in Their Place) on Radio Sarandi. With the court record at hand, Alvarez questioned Lacalle about one of the most infamous criminal cases relating to his administration the sale of a bank that had been taken over to avoid a bankruptcy that would have had profound social repercussions. Subsequently, his chief advisor Daniel Cambon and then president of the Banco Central Enrique Braga were tried and jailed. The most serious issue is that, in the same court record, the judge found that Julia Pou, Lacalle's wife, had received a bribe worth 3.33% of the amount of the fraudulent sale.

Alvarez confronted Lacalle with this information and added that the judge had authorized him to say publically that he had not sent Pou to jail because at the time he rendered the verdict the anti-corruption law did not exist. This law classified influence peddling, which Pou had been involved in, as a crime. Lacalle was unable to explain the situation. That was the last broadcast of *Las cosas en su sitio*; Alvarez was fired by Radio Sarandi that same day.

A week before the primaries, Blancos and Colorados joined forces to mount accusations against the government and thus discredit the FA and its candidates. Blanco Deputy Jaime Trobo did not hesitate to exploit public sensibilities and throw out an alarmist story on June 22, claiming that the government had hidden a health crisis and that a person had died of the H1N1 (swine flu) virus, while another 1,000 (a number at that time not even registered in Argentina with a population 10 times greater) were affected.

Not until seven days later did the first victim die. As of July 8, four people had died and 163 others were under medical observation, a far cry from the version with which Trobo tried to discredit the government. Everything indicates that, in the four months until the presidential elections, the campaign will go from turbulent to dirty.

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