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Center-Left Frente Amplio Poised to Win Second Term in Uruguay

by LADB Staff

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Although the Uruguayan presidential election is still two months away, leading polls indicate that the Frente Amplio (FA) will win the Oct. 25 contest. The governing party seems unlikely, however, to obtain the 50% necessary to avoid a runoff. Polls show between 44% and 45% voter intention for the FA, which would necessitate a second round in which the conservative opposition would all vote for the Partido Blanco (PB or Nacional) candidate.

Even so, experts say that former Tupamaro guerrilla Jose Mujica will likely soundly defeat former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) to assume the presidency of the second progressive government in Uruguay's 177-year history.

Also on Oct. 25, citizens will vote Yes or No on two crucial referendum questions. One would annul a law giving impunity to military and police personnel who committed human rights violations during the state terrorism of the 1973-1985 dictatorship; the other would give citizens living abroad the right to vote by mail. Both measures are likely to win.

The electoral campaign, which kicked off on June 28 when the parties chose their candidates in open primary elections (see NotiSur, 2009-07-10), is moving forward in an unfriendly atmosphere dominated by personal attacks and the absence of a debate on issues. In this tiny country with a high cultural level and an exaggerated respect for good manners, there have even been repeated displays of extreme intolerance never before seen in an election campaign. For example, the opposition has made Mujica the center of a campaign in which his social standing, his colloquial language that is a far cry from conventional academic speech, and his unfashionable and simple clothes are ridiculed.

The PB also displays notable gender discrimination, having no women among its candidates for congressional seats. This prompted two longtime and well-known party militants Deputies Beatriz Argimon and Sandra Etcheverry to distance themselves from the campaign. Mujica makes education a priority. In his public appearances with vice presidential candidate Danilo Astori, Mujica enumerates and praises the achievements of the nation's first progressive government, led by President Tabare Vazquez, and he has focused his campaign on the need to expand education and knowledge.

One of Mujica's favorite phrases, "Freedom is achieved not with bullets but with knowledge," has a strange ring coming from a former guerrilla who spent 13 years in prison. But, in recapping Vazquez's social policies, Mujica stresses that the administration has devoted 4.5% of GDP to education, and he emphasizes that, if elected, his administration would gradually increase that amount "until we are among the most advanced countries in the world."

Mujica told a select group of researchers, university professors, and cultural personalities who have been writing the FA education program that Uruguay "cannot afford the luxury of having young people who are not studying or who drop out of college. We are entering a new era, one of knowledge." The highest objective of Mujica, who did not finish high school, seemed summed up in the words, "Knowledge will be the most important possession in the world of the future." He went on to highlight the urgency of enrolling all children in school full time and all young people in vocational/professional education, "because in 30 or 40 years the world will be unrecognizable and there will be no place for those who do not develop learning and knowledge."

Obviously, not everything in Mujica's campaign is above reproach. Every day he discredits his rival, listing the multiple proven cases of corruption during his administration. Lacalle and running mate Sen. Jorge Larranaga have narrowed their objectives by emphasizing the need to combat insecurity, which has left them open to criticism, not only from the government and the FA but also from citizens and experts who prefer to talk about a "feeling of insecurity." "Lacalle took the wrong road by not setting a number-one objective and by reducing his campaign to confronting the government and using the perception of insecurity to justify his proposal for a repressive police force," said sociologist Jaime Yaffe.

Other political scientists and analysts concurred. Although statistics show that crime has been reduced, the PB candidate uses the discourse prevalent in the major media to bolster his campaign. The Ministerio del Interior's Observatorio Nacional sobre Violencia y Criminalidad said that crime had gone down 5% nationally, but homicide had increased 31%. The Observatorio made an important clarification, however: "Gender crimes, domestic violence, and disputes between neighbors accounted for 81.3% of homicide victims, not robbery or rape, the crimes that indicate real insecurity."

Although the report was not disputed, Lacalle repeats, "It's enough to look at the first 20 minutes of the top TV news programs to understand that we are facing the most terrible insecurity." Clearly one of the media's objectives is to talk about insecurity to increase the feeling of insecurity. Mujica is not alone in challenging such statements.

On Aug. 4, at the Conferencia Interamericana sobre Seguridad of the Organization of American States (OAS), Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza said, "Uruguay is not free from crime, but its crime rates are the best in the region." At the same meeting, OAS Secretary for Multidimensional Security Alexander Addor-Neto's statement, "It is fundamental to demilitarize public security," was damaging to the principal proposal of the PB candidate, who wants to create a militarized police force to fight crime.

Lacalle tells potential investors to wait

Despite the scant attention paid to "these proposals short on ideals," as political analyst Adolfo Garce put it, many analysts believe that Lacalle might have sealed his fate on June 25 when, in a press briefing, he suggested to investors that they "should not invest in the country. In your place, I would wait until the end of the year to see what government the country will have a serious government that respects capital or an irresponsible one that attacks it." It was a "very serious"

mistake, said Garce. In Uruguay, where the matter has become state policy, the statement fell as if from a foreign enemy.

The government responded to Lacalle's statement using phrases such as "dirty trick," "sabotage," and "criminal act." Not only statistics are hitting the PB leader. Vice Minister of Industry Gerardo Gadea showed figures indicating an increase in investment and on July 7 said that, if the figures go down, "it will be clear who is working for the country and who is sabotaging everyone's efforts." Gadea said that, as of May 31, 169 investment projects, valued at US\$583 million, had been presented, "while for all of 2008 there were 311 projects, valued at US\$1.1 billion."

Reports from JP Morgan and the Centro Interamericano de Administraciones Tributarias (CIAT) were also favorable to Mujica's candidacy. In a report to its clients on Aug. 14, JP Morgan pointed to "the stability of the Uruguayan economy" and the positive results indicating that "economic activity has begun to recover." CIAT, an international public nonprofit organization, had said on July 28 that, while value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) revenue had fallen throughout the region, Uruguay was the only country that experienced growth, which "is a clear indicator of the good health of the Uruguayan economy."

The Camara de Comercio said, "The country fulfilled all the requirements regarding investment-law regulations, which was a fundamental step in a world where 130 countries compete for investments." In a ceremony before 300 businesspeople on July 14 at the Palacio del Mercosur in Montevideo, the president of the influential Camara de Comercio Argentino-Uruguayo, Juan Carlos Lopez Mena, praised government policies and, taking President Vazquez's arm, led the applause of his counterparts when he said, "One of the most important achievements of your government, Dr. Vazquez, is intangible, but it is essential and decisive confidence in the country, the credibility and the legal security that it offers national and foreign investors."

"We hope that the governments that follow will maintain this jewel," said Lopez Mena, owner of an airline and the principal ferry line linking Argentina and Uruguay on the Rio de la Plata. The decidedly pro-Blanco newspaper El Pais reported that Lacalle felt all eyes focused on him, sitting in the front row among the invited guests at the event in the conference room of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) headquarters.

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