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LADB Staff

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Uruguayan Presidential Race Goes to Runoff

by LADB Staff

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Although the governing Frente Amplio (FA) came close to winning a second-consecutive presidential term in the Oct. 25 elections, Uruguayans will have to go through a runoff on Nov. 29 to determine who will lead the country in the March 2010-March 2015 term. Frente Amplio candidate Sen. Jose Mujica, an ex-guerrilla and former livestock, agriculture, and fisheries minister, who received 48.16% of the votes, will face off against Luis Alberto Lacalle, a powerful landowner, former president (1990-1995), and leader of the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco), who came in second with 28.94%. Mujica needed 50% plus one to avoid the runoff.

Alongside the presidential and legislative choices were two "Yes" or "No" referendum questions on crucial issues for governing-party activists (see NotiSur, 2009-01-23). The first was whether to annul a law guaranteeing impunity to military personnel and police who committed crimes against humanity during the 1973-1985 dictatorship; the second was whether to grant absentee voting to the 501,000 Uruguayans living outside the country who emigrated for economic or political reasons (many persecuted during the dictatorship). Neither measure garnered the absolute majority required by the Constitution for passage.

For the FA, which took 50.4% of the votes in 2004 to break the lock on power that the Blancos and the Partido Colorado (PC) have had, alternating in power since 1830, this validation not only marked a milestone in the country's history but also ratified it as the principal group on the new political map.

Although the FA did not win in the first round, all political analysts and observers agree that it will win the runoff. In this small country with just over 3.4 million people and barely 2.5 million eligible voters, the FA was only 1.84%, slightly more than 35,000 votes, shy of winning the presidency. The party won a majority in both houses of Congress (16 of the 30 senators and 50 of the 99 deputies).

The legitimacy of the mandate that the FA is likely to win in the runoff is evidenced by something uncommon in representative democracies: on Oct. 25, 91% of eligible voters went to the polls, which, for Corte Electoral (CE) president Edgardo Martinez Zimairoff, was the entire electorate, since, in all likelihood, most of the remaining 9% had died in the last eight months but had not yet been removed from the register, were ill on election day, or had emigrated during the past decade (a virtual exodus that averages 20,000 people a year).

Mujica benefitted from Vazquez's successes

Mujica was the favorite going into the elections because of the good outcomes of policies implemented by the first FA government, headed by President Tabare Vazquez, who, since he took office in March 2005, worked to significantly improve the country's social and economic indicators. Unemployment dropped from almost 14% when Vazquez took office to 6.5% now, a level not seen since the early 1950s. Poverty declined from 31% of the population to 19%, and extreme poverty fell almost 5 percentage points to 1.5%.

"Inequality was reduced, but some sectors are difficult to include, those with the worst poverty, a legacy of decades of exclusionary policies promoted by the traditional parties," said economist Ruben Tansini, director of the economics department at the public Universidad de la Republic (UdelaR). "Growth and investment levels have risen, but that has still not brought about a redistribution of wealth. Clusters of hard-core urban poverty formed that are difficult to eradicate. Children are born into poverty, and the government has not found the way to break this dramatic vicious cycle."

The population perceives an improvement. Forty-five percent, almost half of those over 17 years of age, believe that poverty has diminished during the FA government. In addition, the purchasing power of wages has increased almost 25%, there is near-universal health care, and spending on education stands at about 4.5% of GDP.

Lacalle's many mistakes

Lacalle, who began his electoral campaign only five points behind Mujica, made a series of decisive mistakes, say political analysts, that resulted in his coming in almost 20 points behind Mujica on election day. In the last 45 days of the campaign, Lacalle dropped an average of three points every two weeks, the period between voter-preference polls. "

And he continued dropping, meaning that, in the runoff, he may no longer be able to count on the 28.94% of the vote that he received" on Oct. 25, said sociologist Adolfo Garce of UdelaR's Instituto de Ciencia Politica. Lacalle's first big mistake was announcing that he would end the social programs that made poverty- and indigence-reduction possible. "We will come in with a chain saw to cut off at the roots those plans that only serve to buy the votes of lazy bums," he railed, although he later had to apologize.

His second error was conjuring up a climate of social instability and political risk that did not exist and recommending that investors not risk their funds until seeing the election results (see NotiSur, 2009-08-28). Although the damage was already done, to the detriment of the country, he again had to apologize.

Despite the positive socioeconomic indicators, Lacalle said he would review everything done by the Vazquez administration. When he unveiled his government plan, he used words like "eliminate," "modify," "adjust," "redesign," "transform," "redefine," and "re-establish." Among the items Lacalle proposed eliminating was the law establishing the eight-hour workday for rural workers. That was his third major error, but he did not retract it, nor did he retract his comments that Mujica "lives in a filthy rathole," referring to the modest home of the FA candidate.

The election results were an eloquent response. Society overall rejected Lacalle's proposals. But so did agricultural producers and the rural population, two sectors until now immune from the progressive message. The FA, which had a majority in eight of Uruguay's 19 departments, won in three others that had always had Blanco governments Colonia, San Jose, and Soriano and it consolidated its strength throughout the western agricultural area and in the dairy basin. After all, Mujica was livestock, agriculture, and fisheries minister in the Vazquez administration until he resigned to run for the presidency.

But voter rejection extended to an area where the Blanco candidate least expected it. Lacalle thought he could score points by reminding people of Mujica's guerrilla past. "If the fear is [Presidents] Rafael Correa [Ecuador], Hugo Chavez [Venezuela], or Evo Morales [Bolivia], no, folks, we're beyond that. The demon doesn't exist. Mujica does not cause any uneasiness because Uruguay is neither Ecuador nor Venezuela nor Bolivia. Here we have the highest legal guarantees, and Mujica is not a political outsider, he has been part of the system since he re-entered it 20 years ago," Alfonso Varela, president of the powerful Camara de Comercio y Servicios, told a business audience.

"Regardless of their personal sympathies, business people know that, when it comes to planning investments, they have nothing to worry about if Mujica is the new president," economist Gabriel Oddone, a partner at CPA Ferrere, a prestigious consulting firm for rural issues, told the same audience.

"Uruguay has the lowest level of country risk in its history, which strengthens economic stability. I have no doubt that with the next administration whether Mujica or Lacalle is president Uruguay will receive the most important investment influx that it has ever received," added Angel Urraburu, president of the stock exchange (Bolsa de Valores).

The crowning blow came from three high-ranking US officials. On Sept. 10, all the dailies ran the opinions of Everett Eissenstat, assistant US trade representative for the Americas, Christopher McMullen, deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, and Walter Bastian, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for the Western Hemisphere. Agence France-Press reported that all three, interviewed in Washington, "chose their words very carefully when asked about the electoral campaign in Uruguay."

They all said, "It doesn't matter whether Lacalle or Mujica wins. US policy will be the same and the relationship will be strengthened." McMullen added, "No one in the [President Barack] Obama administration is concerned that Mujica will strengthen the Venezuela-Bolivia-Ecuador axis. It will be Uruguay's sovereign decision."

The PC officially announced that it would support Lacalle in the runoff, but some of its leaders have already said that they would not adhere to that decision and would vote for Mujica. The Partido Independiente (PI), which received 2.5% of the votes, will split its support between the two candidates.

The radical-left Asamblea Popular, which took 0.7%, refuses to say what it will do, but its votes are expected to go to the FA. "The right believes that Uruguay has what Marxists call class struggle, that's why the Colorados give their votes to the Blancos, but you don't have to be a genius to know that the mathematical and political analyses indicate that Lacalle has no possibility of becoming the next president," said Garce. All the polling firms agree with him, although some do not say so publically for business reasons.

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