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Frente Amplio's Jose Pepe Mujica Wins Runoff Election in Uruguay

by LADB Staff

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With the resounding Nov. 29 runoff victory of the Frente Amplio (FA) and its candidate Jose Pepe Mujica against former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) of the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco), Uruguay definitively reaffirmed its place among the progressive governments that dominate South America.

Voters opted to continue with a government program that will bury for many years, or forever, attempts by rightist parties and powerful groups to unite in a runoff to restore the failed standards of looting and economic neoliberalism that dominated the entire region during the last decade of the 20th century. In the first-round vote on Oct. 25, the FA came just shy of capturing 50% of the votes and won an absolute majority in both houses of the legislature (Asamblea General).

Coming in almost 20 percentage points behind the FA in the first round, the PN had the impossible task of unseating the leftist alliance that, with Tabare Vazquez's election in 2004, had come to power for the first time in Latin America's smallest country. Although the PN received explicit support from the other traditional conservative party, the Partido Colorado (PC), the FA, with no ally, garnered 10 percentage points more than the opposition on Nov. 29.

Mujica, who will be accompanied during his five-year term by Vice President-elect Danilo Astori, takes office with two fundamental principles: domestically, "to lead an endless search for dialogue in order to achieve every consensus possible," and, internationally, to put continental integration on the front burner.

Domestic and international plans underway

On the domestic front, Mujica has already had meetings with opposition leaders. He will also meet with the powerful unions and social groups which play a prominent role in Uruguay's political life to outline government policies in four basic areas: education, the FA's top priority; energy from alternative sources, especially solar and wind, to the most controversial, nuclear power plants; environment, which could affect industrial and agricultural development; and security, a problem that has increased as a natural result of social exclusion.

Internationally, Mujica and Spain's President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero have already agreed to sign, at the bicentennial celebration of the beginning of Latin America's independence struggles in 2010, the most important strategic agreement reached by Europe and South America. At that time, Zapatero will preside in the European Union (EU) and Mujica will head the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR).

"This election is a historic milestone, because, until Nov. 28, the traditional rightist parties [the Blancos and Colorados] waged the dirtiest campaign in memory, aimed at terrifying society, stirring

up ghosts from the past with the frustrated intent to move the people away from their only authentic political expression, the FA," said Eduardo Bonomi, former labor minister, senator-elect, and the only representative authorized by Mujica to dialogue with the opposition. Bonomi, like the president-elect, a former guerrilla, referred in statements to the press to the demons resurrected by the right in an attempt to frighten the electorate and convince them, when it came time to vote, to abandon the FA.

For the first time in 2004, when Vazquez was elected, Uruguayans demonstrated that they did not fear the left. With that election, the specter of the "revolutionary left" disappeared, of which the former Soviet Union was the paradigm.

During the Vazquez administration, and despite a law guaranteeing impunity to the military who violated human rights during the 1973-1985 dictatorship, the government found the legal tools to bring to trial, convict, and sentence those most responsible for the kidnappings, torture, deaths, and disappearances. Thus, the assertion that imprisoning even one military officer would bring an automatic coup was proven false. The specter of a coup was laid to rest.

In the latest election, warnings of Blancos and Colorados that Mujica would bring back "guerrilla terrorism" were ignored by the 53% of Uruguayans who elected him with the most votes in Uruguayan history. Ernesto Agazzi, one of the many ex-guerrillas who suffered inhuman detention conditions, and who was minister of livestock, agriculture, and fisheries in the Vazquez administration, said, "While we paid the social price of marginalization before, now we'll see if the situation changes."

He elaborated: "Lucia Topolansky [wife of Mujica, former political prisoner, and former guerrilla] is now the most-voted-for senator in the country. Ivonne Passada [another former insurgent leader] presides in the Chamber of Deputies. Pepe will be president, and Bonomi is a first-class political facilitator. In our political family, we feel an enormous satisfaction, and that is neither having false pride nor feeling better than someone else, but being in those positions because the people elect you is different from being where other leaders allow you to be."

Agazzi said that Mujica's assumption of the presidency "will serve to leave behind the 1960s, the polarization of the country, and, finally, the national security doctrine imposed on us from outside."

Two visions for future

Clearly two opposing models for the country were at play in this election, two opposite concepts, and Uruguayans chose the progressive option. Mujica and Astori were representing a government that has achieved recognized social gains; Lacalle and his running mate Jorge Larranaga represented the return to neoliberalism. The FA's campaign platform, with "proposals for continuing to build a first-class country," had as its central plank advancing economic and social development.

The Blanco platform offered a repetition of the Lacalle administration's failures privatizations of state banks, business closings, a decline in purchasing power, elimination of dialogue and negotiation between employers and workers. The FA proposed an Uruguay inserted in the world

and integrated into the region, "part of an international community and a defender of regional identity."

The Blancos championed disintegration. In a meeting with correspondents from international news agencies, Lacalle said that Uruguay should distance itself as much as possible from Argentina and Brazil, Uruguay's powerful neighbors on whom it is economically dependent. He also said that if he were elected he would withdraw from the Parlamento del MERCOSUR, reduce trade ties with MERCOSUR countries, freeze relations with Argentina, and revisit the legislative vote supporting Venezuela's membership in the trade bloc.

Lacalle's previously tried and failed proposals caused many eligible Blanco voters to abstain in the runoff (explaining the 4% of invalid ballots), and a high percentage of Colorados did not follow party-leadership instructions to support Lacalle.

Walter Pesqueira, an expert in electoral analysis, and the polling firm Factum, the most reliable in making predictions, said that between 20% and 22% of Colorados voted for Mujica-Astori in the runoff. "That means that tens of thousands of citizens who voted for the PN or PC on Oct. 25 ignored recommendations of party leaders and voted for the Frente Amplio, adding to Mujica's total," said Pesqueira in a column in the Uruguayan daily La Republica (see NotiSur, 2009-11-06).

Mujica spent 13 years in prison, a time in which he and the eight other guerrilla leaders were hostages of the dictators, held separately in the worst imaginable conditions in violation of human rights. "The military opted to leave them alive, but humiliated and tortured, as a repudiable example of defeat," said a Radio Nederland post-electoral assessment.

Coming from a background of poverty and continuing to live modestly, Mujica is self-educated and did not finish secondary school. He lives a notably austere life in a precarious house built on a lot on the outskirts of Montevideo. "He is a fabulous communicator, unique in Uruguayan political history," said political analyst Jaime Yaffe. Everyone, supporters and opponents, writes and talks about him with a certain amount of admiration. "He went through all the dangers," wrote journalist Natalia Uval, "and he must now face another danger, perhaps more frightening than the bullets of the military: power, its abuses, and its blindness.

Mujica said in 1999 that very powerful people are always dangerous, more because of the groups that surround them than in themselves. But because of his history, it seems possible that the future president could also overcome this latest risk and arrive at his final voyage, as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado says, 'light of luggage, half-naked, like the children of the sea.'

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