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Uruguay: Opposition Parties Ponder Unifying After Electoral Defeat

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Almost six months after losing the second-consecutive presidential election to the Frente Amplio (FA), and with the wounds of defeat still fresh, leaders of the traditional Uruguayan political parties the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) and the Partido Colorado (PC) appear incapable of engaging in a process of self-criticism to understand why, year after year, they lose important segments of the electorate. Now, nevertheless, many of their leaders, convinced that citizens see in one or the other party the representation of only diffusely different interests that do not justify splitting their votes, launched an ambitious proposal that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. The proposal called on the parties to form a single party while trying to preserve their respective identities distinctive names and colors, and the image of the personalities who founded them in 1836, in the midst of the country's first civil war, with improvised armies that were distinguishable only by the distinctive white or red color affixed to their hats. Although some analysts have responded by talking about the maturity of certain leaders, it is clear that unification is, as its mentors expressly stated, simply a product of necessity. On May 9, voters will elect governors (intendentes municipales) of Uruguay's 19 departments, and the Blancos and Colorados could add at least three more to the eight they lost in the 2005 municipal elections, when the FA consolidated power after having elected former President Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) the previous October (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12, 2005-05-20). If, besides losing the national government, the two traditional parties lose additional departmental governments, they would definitively forfeit control of the public administration, something that historically has ensured them exclusive control of privileges, perks, public jobs, and, above all, a monopoly of the use of the state apparatus. The latter provides a bottomless well of votes that has allowed them to remain in the government for 169 years, during almost the entire period since the tiny country's independence. Blanco senator suggests unifying opposition Only 48 hours after the FA's José "Pepe" Mujica won the presidential runoff (see NotiSur, 2009-12-11), Blanco Sen. Francisco Gallinal used the pages of the daily El País, on Dec. 3, 2009, to point out that "if we want to win the governorships, it's time to make pragmatic decisions and analyze things with a cool head to think about eventual alliances with the Colorados in those departments where there is a risk of losing the May 9 municipal elections." But that was not all. Gallinal said, "The FA is an alliance of 17 parties and political groups put together to try to win, and in the end they won and they took power. This example demonstrates that we must analyze with an open mind, because the country has undergone a great cultural change, and we must not ignore it or rule anything out. If we can make an alliance and win, why not do so?" Both the senator and the newspaper are PN heavyweights. It is no exaggeration to say that they are part of the very history of the party. Gallinal is the great-grandson of the first rich Blanco landowner who financed and armed the partisan troops in the 1898 and 1904 civil wars. In a county where the print media have always been partisan, El País has served as the PN's official voice for 92 years. El País is a morning paper. Before noon on Dec. 3, a Facebook page, which was at the service of the Colorado ticket of Pedro Bordaberry and Hugo de León during the presidential campaign, got the scoop and responded to Gallinal. "That would be a very powerful renewal factor," wrote
the authors. "Just as the Colorados supported the Blanco ticket in the November runoff, now we ask the Blancos and the Partido Independiente (PI) voters [just over 1% of the national electorate] to support us in the De León candidacy. This is patriotism." That afternoon, the first comments, all favorable, appeared on the PN Web page in response to Gallinal's proposal. "To come to the municipal elections with separate candidates is to risk total defeat; the Frente Amplio would wipe us out forever," wrote someone identified as "a Blanco and patriotic youth." "Until the Marxist storm has passed, we must agree on candidates with the Partido Colorado," another wrote, from another time and space and, above all, without clearly understanding what is really going on in Uruguay today. "There is no reason to fear alliances, we have to make them. We cannot give up the interior departments, the interior has to be ours, the Blanco's and Colorado's homeland," wrote another firebrand. While some leaders of both parties said that right now, so soon after the November defeat, was perhaps not the best time to talk of uniting, almost all Blancos and most Colorados said it was not a bad thing to begin thinking about how to someday defeat the ascendant Frente Amplio. In at least five interior departments, the local Colorado leaders admitted that their Blanco counterparts were in better conditions to compete and gave them their support. They were punished or expelled outright from the PC. In other departments, the dialogue was left until after the May 9 elections. Influential newspaper backs unification On the premise that Uruguay needs to create a "real and challenging alternative to FA power," an El País editorial said that it was necessary to promote periodic meetings of the Blanco, Colorado, and Independiente authorities to forge the unity that "the country demands." The newspaper, conscious of its ideological-leadership role within the PN, said, "It's not possible to advance a process of understanding between parties that preserves the distinct traditions, identities, programs, and leadership if the effort is focused only on elections. It would be a useless proposition without making progress at the same time toward an in-depth, serious, and substantive political understanding involving the two traditional parties and also inviting the active participation of the Partido Independiente." Now in the role of standard-bearer of that budding new party, El País said, "The idea is to achieve an understanding that overcomes the temptation to favor a sense of convergence just to stop the left [Frente Amplio], because such a limited perspective would mean the undertaking's failure. The public will never allow an alliance based on the negative, an agreement motivated only by the shock of seeing the country in the hands of the anti-republican political-trade union alliance that represents the most reactionary forces of the Frente Amplio." The editorial went on, with language not used for many years, "That's why we say that we must study in depth the definition of a model country that safeguards the best national traditions and makes possible a path of growth based on institutional advances committed to the best of the West." School elections bring reality check Until late February, all seemed to be going well for El País and for Gallinal and the other leaders who backed Blanco-Colorado unity. But two events cast a pall on the panorama. Elections were held in the public-education system's Consejo Directivo Central (CDN) to choose teacher delegates and in the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Uruguay (FEUU) to choose the union's new leaders and elect student delegates for the bodies that run the state Universidad de la República (UNDELAR). In both cases, slates made up of both Blancos and Colorados following advice from party leaders were crushed by the Frente Amplio slates. Then, the first self-critical evaluation of the November electoral defeat was released. Its author was Sen. Eber da Rosa, secretary-general of the most important PN sector, and its content was memorable because the legislator did not even mention the possibility of opening a dialogue with the PC. He focused his entire evaluation on harshly criticizing party leaders, and he raised the need to "re-establish" the PN on new bases, "reasonable and uncontaminated." Da Rosa said that former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995), who lost the November presidential runoff
to Mujica, is a political conservative with little inclination for social issues. "Lacalle," he wrote in his lengthy evaluation, "is an outmoded politician, fit for the time of the Cold War, a hostage to the preconceptions and mentality of that era." Besides being a politician with little sensitivity to people's problems, "his mind is set to defend the interests of the powerful." Da Rosa went on to describe the powerful: residents of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Montevideo, bankers, and large landowners. Jorge Larranaga, Lacalle's running mate in November, did not agree with Da Rosa's assessment nor did he agree, at first, with unifying the parties. But in later statements to the daily Últimas Noticias, he did not reject outright either the senator's comments or the possibility of sitting down and talking with the Colorados. But he did say that, before anything else, "the Blancos have to change their rightist image and stop being the group that defends only the rich and the aristocrats."

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