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Uruguay: President José Mujica's Positions Puzzle Supporters

by LADB Staff
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Since assuming the presidency on March 1, Uruguayan President José Mujica has begun a frenzied rush to "rebuild" the deteriorated relations between the armed forces and civilian society into a peaceful coexistence that for many decades has seemed incurably impossible. Besides his talk of rebuilding, Mujica mentioned "reconciliation," "social harmony," and "integration," all concepts with the same goal. But, in a poll published by the daily Últimas Noticias, 61% of Uruguayans said that promoting a cordial relationship with the military did not interest them "because getting along with the enemy is impossible" or "because the military must first ask for forgiveness for the crimes committed during the [1973-1985] dictatorship." Mujica, who, as a member of the guerrilla Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T), was a military prisoner from 1972 to 1985 and subjected to inhumane and degrading detention conditions, has assumed an attitude toward his former jailers that the left and his old Tupamaro comrades have been unable to understand. In his little more than 100 days in the presidency, Mujica has made a series of proposals that were not part of the government program of the progressive Frente Amplio (FA). He timidly proposed establishing a system of obligatory military service (a draft) to "cure" young drug addicts through military training and discipline. The rejection was absolute. The president suggested that soldiers take charge of a low-cost housing program. They told him no. Mujica announced that he would send Congress a bill to allow all prisoners over 70 years of age to serve out their sentences under house arrest rather than in regular prisons (benefitting leaders of the dictatorship who are serving 30-year sentences). Except for the kidnappers, murderers, and torturers, no voice was raised to support Mujica's proposal. And most recently, he has responded with unusual severity to a letter from Costa Rica's then President Óscar Arias (1986-1990 and 2006-2010) in which Arias spoke respectfully and diplomatically about the benefits of dissolving the armed forces. President Arias suggests Mujica follow Costa Rica's example Costa Rica disbanded its armed forces in 1948. President Arias said in an extensive interview broadcast by radio station El Espectador in Montevideo that the 10,000-member police force is currently in charge of citizen security but does not function, for example, as border guards. In specific circumstances, he said, "we have special agreements with the US." Arias was referring to the joint-patrol agreement that allows US Coast Guard ships to enter Costa Rican jurisdiction. He explained that Costa Rican authorities must be on board and that Costa Rica must exercise jurisdiction over the ship, the cargo, and any detainees. Arias said that the agreement expressly prohibits the participation of military ships. Nevertheless, a group of Uruguayan legislators complained that many of the ships are warships and fly the US flag. They also said that, in late 2009, the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) installed a powerful latest-generation radar system in Costa Rican territory. Mujica's reaction was energetic and totally undiplomatic, but in the end he could not prevent the onset of a debate that various sectors had long called for to answer two central questions: What purpose do the armed forces serve? Is maintaining them justified or would it be better to disband them? Barely begun, the debate was aborted by the government. In late March, President Arias sent a letter from San José to his Uruguayan counterpart describing the benefits Costa Rica gained from abolishing its armed forces.
and suggesting, "cordially and respectfully," that a small country like Uruguay, surrounded by South America's two largest countries Brazil and Argentina should follow the same path. With only the press version to go by, Mujica responded, "Mr. Arias would be better off minding his own business rather than meddling in Uruguay's affairs." The much-publicized letter finally arrived on March 30. "I wish to offer advice," said Arias. "Armies are enemies of development, enemies of peace, enemies of freedom, and enemies of joy," and, in Latin America especially, "they have been the source of the most unpleasant collective memory." He added, "It was the military boot that trampled human rights in our region. It was the general's voice that issued the most violent arrest orders against our students and artists; it was the soldier's hand that shot innocent people in the back. In the best scenarios, Latin American armies have been a prohibitive expenditure for our democracies." That is why, said the Costa Rican president, winner of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize, it is preferable "to do what our country did, effect the proscription of the armed forces." Arias reminded Mujica that "Uruguay does not need an army. Its internal security can be handled by the police, and its national security accomplishes nothing with a military apparatus that will never be more powerful than those of its neighbors, which are also democratic countries." Arias logically pointed out that traditionally the reason for the existence of armed forces was to defend countries from foreign attack, but he questioned this concept. "No matter how much Uruguay invests in its military forces, it will never win an arms race against Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, and Venezuela." Arias then said, "In the present circumstances, helplessness is a better security policy for your people than a military inferior to those of your neighbors." Arias' advice not well-received Mujica responded through Defense Minister Luis Rosadilla (another former guerrilla who spent years as a military prisoner and was subjected to the worst conditions). "Mr. Arias is butting in where he should not and in something about which he knows nothing," said Rosadilla, and he seconded leaders of the rightist parties, the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) and the Partido Colorado (PC). To the two central questions on the purpose of the armed forces and whether it would be better to disband them they added two others: "Is there the possibility that Uruguay will suffer a foreign attack from a neighbor or some other country?" "For what purpose and why maintain costly armed forces if the reality indicates that there is no objective to meet? The answers were unequivocal: It seems unlikely that Uruguay will be attacked by any country in the region. But Uruguay is not free from the possibility of a future attack. Julián González, an expert at the Instituto de Ciencia Política of the state Universidad de la República (UdelaR), joined those who condemned Arias and backed Mujica, telling the weekly Brecha, "While it is true that the possibility of an attack [on Uruguay] is extremely remote, it is no less true that the argument about living surrounded by democratic countries is very weak, since it does not take an authoritarian regime to be aggressive. For that, one example suffices the US." Selva López Chírico is a longtime militant of the Partido Socialista de Uruguay (PSU), a member of the Frente Amplio coalition, and a social science professor. She is critical of Mujica's positions on this issue and contends that the arguments about disbanding the armed forces as well as about its role are nothing more than "reproducing the hegemonic discourse on the need to have the armed forces." The root problem, she says, is that "we do not have a visible external enemy and that leaves the armed forces without their principal function. From there, multiple problems arise. When that is presented to the military, they respond that they have to be prepared in case an enemy appears in the future, and they say, for example, that they do very important work, such as providing literacy programs for soldiers. That is true and it is also true that the soldiers are taught to read, but that can and should be done by the public education system. It all results in a frightening inconsistency." How far will Mujica go in this crusade in which he appears increasingly alone? No one knows because no one knows what is motivating him. To everything he
has proposed, they have said no. And now one of his companions from his days with the MLN-T a half-century ago, Julio Marenales, has said that the government should close the Liceo Militar, the training center in military ideology for future officers, which is antagonistic to civil society and offers privileges to adolescents preparing to be officers in the armed forces that other young people do not have, such as clothing, food, and housing. All FA parties and Mujica's former guerrilla comrades insist that a policy of reconciliation, social harmony, and integration is not possible with kidnappers, torturers, and murderers. Isolated, the Uruguayan president should explain very clearly why he wants to develop the policy toward those who even in civilian times continue to be an enemy. Otherwise, he runs the risk of being left alone.

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