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Uruguay's Frente Amplio Looks at Need for Updating

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Uruguay's Frente Amplio (FA) has entered a state of inertia. This progressive coalition was founded in 1971 by several leftist parties, including the Partido Socialista (PS) and the Partido Comunista del Uruguay (PCU), which in 2005 ended the absolute primacy that the two large conservative parties—the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional (Blanco)—had maintained for 131 years. For some, this inertia is the first symptom of an impending major crisis in which the FA's very identity is at stake and, for others, a sign of the imperative need for ideological updating.

The FA, an experiment that the Latin American left took as its model and that political science researchers around the world saw as a unique phenomenon, worthy of analysis, clearly has little to offer today as either an example for politicians or an object for scientific study.

When former President Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) was elected, the FA suddenly had to face the difficult reality of being the party in power after having always been the opposition.

In 2010, when President José Mujica reaped what Vázquez had sowed and ushered in the second progressive government, Uruguayans thought that the time had come for the FA to deepen its socialist-leaning policy. However, Mujica has managed only to confuse everyone, de-energizing and discouraging FA militants who had always been indefatigable, reneging on applying the coalition's foundational program, and even receiving praise from conservative parties. On some central issues such as human rights, land ownership, or the role of the state in the economy, he seemed to break with the left's much-feared long-standing planks.

In recent months, the FA has gone through many critical situations that have prevented it from transcending, in the Congress or through the press, a difficult internal coexistence in an organization that always presented an image of monolithic unity. The rupture in that much-valued unity has had repercussions in society, and polls have begun to measure the discontent with an abrupt drop of more than 20 percentage points in Mujica's approval rating (from 61% to 40%).

Growing policy chasm between FA and president

During this time, the FA has been unable to bring to fruition clearly defined pieces of its action plan. Despite the pressure of a condemnation from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) for keeping on the books a law granting impunity to perpetrators of crimes against humanity during the 1973-1985 dictatorship, it was unable to annul the law (NotiSur, April 15, 2011) and (June 3, 2011).

To make matters worse, the rancor during the legislative debate cost the FA dearly. It lost two of its senators: one resigned from the Senate and the other jointed the ranks of the Blancos—the first desertion of a lawmaker in the FA's four-decade existence.

The foreignization of land ownership, which accelerated in the last decade thanks to the increase in soy monoculture, could not be addressed either. What the coalition's program presented as a sovereignty issue, Mujica reduced to an attempt to get legislation passed that would impose a small tax on large landowners. This caused a huge row with Vice President Danilo Astori, an economist. As a result, the bill was dropped, and foreign investors continue buying up the best lands.
The president was able to impose his criteria in the approval of the Participación Público-Privado (PPP) law, by which the state leaves in the hands of private capital execution of infrastructure works that it does not have the money to finance.

In the FA—which, in the heyday of neoliberal policies in the 1990s, was able to convocate a plebiscite that put the brakes on privatization of state-owned companies—the law became a watershed. A PCU senator refused to vote for it, and three deputies who were against it voted for it out of "party discipline."

Vice Minister of Economy Pedro Buonomo resigned on July 22 because of his huge differences with Economy Minister Fernando Lorenzo, Astori’s most apt student. On July 11, Mujica fired Social Development Minister Ana Vignoli of the PCU. The list of disagreements grows week by week.

After several months in denial, FA president Jorge Brovetto finally admitted that the coalition's situation "is critical." The weekly Brecha—an independent publication with prestige especially among cultural and academic sectors—wrote that as early as the beginning of the year the FA situation resulted in an avalanche of documents from the coalition's most important sectors attempting to modify the economic strategy and improve wealth distribution. The proposals included modifying the tax regimen to increase taxes on those who have more, addressing the concentration and foreignization of land, and designing a productive model not based on the almost exclusive production of commodities such as soy.

"For a long time, the differences in strategy were disguised by talking about a 'culture of opposition' and another unassumed 'culture of government,' but after more than 40 years, the question is what is the FA's strategic project?" wrote a Brecha columnist. "What is the country model that the FA envisions? It must specify whether its aim is to manage capitalism or whether it has a distinct project, one that, although it is not socialist, looks for alternatives to a reality in which the market is, basically, the allocator of resources and where foreign direct investment is almost exclusively the engine of the economy, relegating the role of the state."

No one denies that the FA includes clearly socialist-leaning forces along with others that are barely progressive, but the lack of answers to the present situation results not only from these differences, which have existed since its foundation, but also from the lack of internal debate.

**Replacement of defense minister baffles progressives**

July 21 brought the resignation of another minister, Defense Minister Luis Rosadilla, although it was said to be for health reasons. If that is the case, it would be an absolutely normal occurrence, but Mujica responded by appointing the controversial former senator Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, the senator who resigned because he disagreed with annulling the impunity law.

The new minister, one of the founders of the guerrilla group Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros, has shaken the left in recent years with his positions regarding the armed forces. He was the first to point out the responsibility of civilians in the coup that ushered in the long dictatorship. He opposed turning over to Chilean justice three Uruguayan Army officers wanted in a much-talked-about case, and he even said, in a clearly provocative tone, that "their extradition would be an Operación Condor in reverse." (Operación Condor was the coordinated repression of the left by the military regimes of the Southern Cone during the 1970s and 1980s.)
Fernández Huidobro assumed the public defense of the only active officer, Army Gen. Miguel Dalmao, detained in Uruguay. Civilian justice sentenced Dalmao for responsibility in the murder of a young student militant, but Fernández said he was "convinced of his innocence." For the vast majority of FA militants, his appointment only throws fuel on the fire.

Former President Vázquez, Uruguay's most prestigious progressive, visualized the seriousness of the crisis and, as in other difficult moments in which he has acted as a unifying force, presented a proposal that seemed to faithfully interpret the normally phenomenal militancy that is now dormant. Vázquez proposed an ideological updating of the FA—"understanding that updating does not mean renewing but adapting to the world reality." He spoke of the need for FA leaders to go throughout the country to "discuss and learn with the people," and he said what FA militants have wanted said for a long time—that the FA's areas of participation should be revitalized and broadened.

Vázquez referred to "base committees," the FA's real engine during its foundation, neighborhood units where neighbors engage in political analysis and debate, but where a rich social exchange is also developed.

The former president's convocational power was evident just a few hours later. From the nearly 20 parties and political groups that make up the FA came declarations of commitment to Vázquez's proposal. The FA central leadership announced that, "given the challenge to improve and deepen the dialogue with all strata of society," starting in the first week of September all legislators and agency leaders will travel periodically to areas outside the capital.

Mujica abandoned his personal ambition and told the FA president that he would improve communications channels and, to this end, he appointed a personal representative to see that "party and government maintain a fluid dialogue."

Going beyond the leadership's expressions of good intentions, the few base committees that still function advocated for quickly reopening those meeting and debate places throughout the country that provided a unique experience, imitated by other Latin American progressive organizations.

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