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Uruguay's Frente Amplio in Crisis

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Uruguay's governing Frente Amplio (FA), the prototype of political constructs praised and adopted as a model for many progressive sectors of Latin America, is going through its worst time since its foundation in 1971 and its almost immediate banning in 1973 after a civilian-military dictatorship (1973-1985) took power. On Oct. 11, former President Tabaré Vázquez, (2005-2010), the first FA president, the political leader with the most positive image in the country, and a potential FA candidate for the 2014 presidential elections, made some startling statements regarding a disagreement with neighboring Argentina between 2003 and 2010. He said that, at the time, he had considered a military option as a way to resolve the conflict.

His remarks provoked astonishment and indignation on both sides of the Río de la Plata, and, two days later, he felt compelled to announce his retirement from public life. That left the FA with an internal polemic that will affect its unity and be debated at a continental level because at a time of regional integration its highest leader was thinking about war and because it no longer has the candidate that all saw as a sure winner in the next elections.

Vázquez’s remarks bring up forgotten pulp-mill rift

The tension between the two neighbors began in 2003 when the Finnish multinational Botnia announced plans to build a pulp mill in the Uruguayan city of Fray Bentos on the eastern bank of the Río Uruguay that is the border. Residents of the Argentine city of Gualeguaychú claimed the plant would pollute the area (NotiSur, Sept. 16, 2005).

The two cities were connected by the largest of three bridges that span the Río Uruguay, a strategic crossing for commerce of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR). More than half the merchandise traded among Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil moved across that bridge. As construction of the pulp mill progressed, people on the Argentine side took over the bridge and kept it closed to traffic—pedestrian and vehicular—for 43 months. The situation turned into a diplomatic conflict, but no one ever imagined the possibility of a war, as was recently admitted by the former Uruguayan president.

The two parties ultimately submitted the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague, which found in favor of Uruguay (NotiSur, Oct. 9, 2009). Finally, the bridge was opened and transit of people and merchandise resumed in June 2010 (NotiSur, Aug. 13, 2010).
With 1,100 trucks from the three countries crossing the bridge daily, and with a flood of Argentine tourists returning to Uruguayan beaches during the recent Southern Hemisphere summer, the conflict was forgotten. It was only present in the two cities historically united by the river but divided beginning in 2007, when residents of Fray Bentos felt "attacked" by the bridge's closure.

No one could have imagined that, with the conflict resolved, Vázquez or anyone else would make such a disclosure. The former president said that, "once we raised the possibility of war," when the confrontation was at its height in 2007, he asked for military help, first from former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and then directly from President George W. Bush, whom the FA publically referred to as a person guilty of "genocide."

What was most surprising was that the former president "had gone to ask for help from Big Brother Bush [a reference to the George Orwell novel 1984], someone involved in every bombing or invasion party organized anywhere in the world," wrote humorist Santiago Varela, echoing the serious sentiments of the majority.

Vázquez apologizes and retires from public life

Early on Oct. 13, Uruguayans awakened to radio stations reading a statement in which Vázquez announced his retirement from political life. He said that, on Oct. 11, he had recounted "what really occurred" and did so "taking into account the excellent relations fortunately enjoyed by these two neighboring countries today." Vázquez admitted that his words "could harm those relations, the political project of the Uruguayan left, and the Frente Amplio itself" and therefore "I present my apologies and announce my retirement from public political activity."

Vázquez said nothing about the setting in which he made his statements, an Opus Dei secondary school, or about where he had gone to seek help—the White House. In a secular and politically integrationist and Latin Americanist country, the Catholic organization and the US government, especially that of Bush, are repudiated by progressive sectors, not only the Frente Amplio but also other progressive parties.

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Neither analysts nor political leaders akin or opposed to the FA have as yet been able to understand what led Vázquez to choose those adolescents to speak with on a topic that was not on anyone's agenda and tell them that he had asked for help from someone whom his own party saw as an enemy.

Two weeks before his statements, Vázquez had re-entered active political life, after taking a long rest, during which he dedicated himself exclusively to his medical profession as an oncologist and to research.

On Sept. 24, for the first time in years, the meeting of the Plenario Nacional—the FA's highest authority—was open to the public, to receive and integrate the former president into that leadership body.
Earlier, he had taken another step indicative of his return to party activity. On Aug. 25, he presented to his comité de base (base committee, the neighborhood organization for all activist FA members) the document Preliminary points toward an eventual ideological updating of the Frente Amplio. At the time, no one doubted that the FA leadership prepared the ritual for his return because it recognized that the fate of its political efforts in the 2014 elections were tied to Vázquez's presence on the political scene.

**Party must re-examine its agenda**

Aside from the enthusiasms or critical questions that arise, that belief is based on a change of direction within the FA. "In its last terms in office, the coalition's success seems to be based more on the strength of its leaders than on programmatic offerings or permanent political actions. In that logic, charisma is more profitable, or at least it was for two election victories [after Vázquez, President José Mujica assumed office], to the detriment of the traditional positions of the Uruguayan left. And no one doubts Vázquez's charisma, confirmed as well by the level of general acceptance he had when his term ended—an approval rating of more than 80%," wrote the prestigious progressive magazine Brecha.

Within the FA, Vázquez seemed to be the only one capable of calming the internal turbulence, not only because of his repeated call for unity but also, say party leaders, because his withdrawal from political life puts at stake—"mortgages" was the word used—the 2014 electoral victory. Those factors had allowed him to resume his position as leader and candidate, relaunching the ideological updating and determining the actions that the FA would have to observe and follow in the present and even the next elections.

Therefore, and despite the Plenario Nacional's ratification at that Sept. 24 meeting that "the FA is a political force for change and social justice, the permanent historic creation of the Uruguayan people, nationalist, progressive, democratic, popular, anti-oligarchic, and anti-imperialist," the same day that Vázquez announced his retirement, the party leadership said it would immediately initiate "actions to get the compañero to change his mind."

An FA secretariat statement was very clear on that point: "His recognition that his statements were inappropriate, far from reducing his stature as a publicactor and a person, enhances it because of the intellectual honesty that his public position took, [so] the FA is prepared to make every effort to see that not only our force but also the country will continue counting on a figure like Tabaré Vázquez."

While the longstanding Blanco and Colorado parties celebrate Vazquez's retirement—that is, the disappearance of the best person to thwart their plans to return to government—most political analysts agree with the FA leadership and believe that Vázquez will re-examine his position and, when the waters have calmed, resume his political activity.
Clearly Vázquez will not do so within the same Frente Amplio because the debate that has been opened internally presupposes rifts and splits, not only in the party leadership but also among the rank and file, especially members from the pure left who created the FA, gave it life, and made it possible, after 12 years of repression, to come back united and expanded, until it displaced the Blancos and Colorados from the government in which they had alternated power for almost a century and a half.

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