2-1-2013

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Andrés Gaudán

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Uruguay's President José Mujica's Simplicity Draws Attention Around the Globe

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Uruguay

Published: 2013-02-01

In mid-December 2012, the small newspaper Jornada in the northern Uruguayan city of Rivera published a surprising story pointing out that, throughout 2012, President José "Pepe" Mujica had been interviewed by major international print media and television channels more than any of his counterparts on six continents. It is true. Mujica was not consulted to find out his opinions on major world events. Uruguay is not a player on that stage. For such consultation, the media go to major political actors, such as US President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

The media are attracted to Mujica for a very particular reason. They all use the exact same words to describe him as "the poorest president in the world." But that is not the only reason that media from The New York Times to The Hindu—the Chennai, India, newspaper with an average daily circulation of 1.8 million copies—come to Montevideo to write stories.

What the media find attractive about this 78-year-old man who lived for 14 years in the basement of a jail to which he had been confined by the 1973-1985 civilian-military dictatorship, is his austere lifestyle. Mujica has no bodyguards, drives himself in his 1971 car, gives 90% of his salary to build low-cost housing, dresses with unusual simplicity, likes to sit and eat with his aides (or alone) in any ordinary bar near the government house, still lives in his modest house in a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of the Uruguayan capital, and cooks his own meals.

Uruguayans call him "El Pepe," and, whether or not they agree with his ideas and way of governing, they respect him. They are proud to know that, because of his unique lifestyle and his austerity, the smallest Spanish-speaking country in the region—only 176,000 sq km with a population of less than 3.3 million—is known throughout the world for more than the quality of its meat and caliber of its soccer players.

President says he lives simply, not in poverty

It does not bother President Mujica to be called poor, but he says that it is not a good description, and, to explain, he lays out his philosophy of life. "They say that I am the poorest president in the world, and I am not poor. Let me tell you that I am not poor, the poor are those who have a lot of needs. I discovered the key to this in the dictatorship's jail cells, when I could not read. Let me tell you that you learn more from pain than from bounty," he said last October when the Argentine Universidad Nacional de la Plata (UNLP) awarded him a degree honoris causa.

"If I have few things, I need little to take care of them, so the time I spend on that is just right. And what does that leave me time for? To spend on things that I like. Only then do I think that I am free," Mujica told the BBC of London.

"It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, who is poor," he told The New York Times on Jan. 5, quoting Seneca, the Roman philosopher born in 4 BCE.
"Don't confuse matters. I am austere, I am not poor nor do I defend poverty. What I say is that we should travel lightly so as to not be committed to things and to have time to do what we most want to do. I live what I believe," he reflected in the Nov. 29 issue of the French magazine Courrier International.

The media quote specific phrases "for their sincerity and honesty," said the BBC journalist whom Mujica surprised when he said, "If I am without work, unemployed, in the middle of Spain, and it turns out that the king is hunting elephants in Africa, why wouldn't I want to lynch the king?"

The press highlights Mujica's lifestyle. A photograph is widely circulating these days showing El Pepe with his wife, Sen. Lucía Topolansky, eating in a modest restaurant called Lo de Pepe. The author titled it "Blessed Uruguay" and commented, "It must be the only country in the world where the president goes out to eat with his wife, alone and without bodyguards."

The TV network Rede Globo, Brazil's largest, was surprised when the president received its journalist dressed in old, dirt-streaked pants that he had been wearing when he was tending the flowers that he cultivates in the small garden at his home. After the two were released from jail in 1985, Mujica and Topolansky became florists and now sell their product in the neighborhood street markets.

"Democracy still has vestiges of feudalism, presidents live in luxurious houses surrounded by staff. The only thing missing is the sound of trumpets when they leave the palace," the president told the Rede Globo reporter.

**Rio+20 speech an Internet sensation**

Mujica's speech at the Rio+20 environmental summit last June received so much attention from the international media that a video of it posted on YouTube has been viewed more than 2 million times. At that meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Mujica strongly questioned the consumer society, with most of humanity "working and overworking to be able to consume more," and he told the more than 180 government representatives gathered there that "the great crisis is not ecological but rather political. Today humans do not control the forces they have unleashed."

In Paris, Courrier International ran as its front-page headline "The Really Normal President," and other stories spread over 12 pages carried titles such as "Poor Is Someone Who Needs Much," "A Country Ahead of Its Time," "From Guerrilla to Government," and "The Unknown Hero of Latin America." In its introduction, the French periodic described the country: "Stifled by two giants, Brazil and Argentina, tiny Uruguay never should have been able to exist. Happily, the quirks of history decided differently. This geographic dwarf often has much more influence, in Latin America and the entire world, than its small demographic numbers would warrant."

In its lead article, Courrier International says, "The 2009 election of José Mujica [NotiSur, Dec. 11, 2009], the second leftist president in the history of Uruguay, could have come and gone without distinction. This is not the first leader in the region with an atypical political past. This old guerrilla survivor of the jails of the dictatorship is truly unique: he seems immune to power and cultivates his reputation as a regular person, rejecting all protocol and donating 90% of his presidential salary. He continues saying what he thinks, to the dismay of those who want a president with more class. And he is not afraid to throw out controversial ideas, such as the complete legalization of marijuana in a region where the war on drug trafficking is a priority. Is he really a normal president?"
The other articles in the French magazine all highlight how Mujica exercises power and his tendency to initiate debates on unconventional issues.

Mujica's distinctive manner benefits country

The Communications Secretary of the Presidency Gonzalo Carámbula smiles when he says that "the major media line up" to talk with Mujica. Those who have spoken with him and those who are scheduled to speak with him include Le Monde, Agence France-Presse, and Libération (France); El País, Radio Pública, and La Vanguardia (Spain); The Miami Herald, USA Today, Associated Press, The Washington Post, and CNN (US); The Economist, Reuters, BBC, and The Independent (Great Britain); Rede Globo, the Sistema Brasileiro de Televisión, O Estado de São Paulo, and Veja (Brazil); Radio Nederland (Holland); Der Spiegel and Deutsche Welle (Germany). And, more than 38 requests for interviews are still waiting to be answered.

Remarkably, Mujica's discourse is equally effective both at home and abroad, although before he became president, Uruguayans had doubts about his ability, especially his public-speaking skills and El Pepe's image as a representative of Uruguay in the world.

Foreign Minister Luis Almagro told the Montevideo weekly Brecha that the president "is admired and respected everywhere." In the opinion of Paraguay's diplomatic chief, Mujica's image even has a mystical component. "His way of presenting issues from a philosophical perspective and with conceptual depth makes it very difficult for any other statesperson to speak after him at an international summit."

Despite the previous doubts, Mujica is now seen internationally as a valuable activist for the country's international integration. The executive secretary of the Unión de Exportadores del Uruguay (UEU) Teresa Aisenberg told the magazine Búsqueda that Mujica's international image is favorable for business. "The president's manner and lifestyle are very different from other leaders, and that gets attention and instills admiration. Behind him is Uruguay; he gives the country a very significant positive characteristic."

Almagro agrees. "For Uruguay and for the foreign service Mujica's stance and magnetism open many, many doors. It awakens the interest of the most important countries in the world; it facilitates export flows and the placement of investments."

The Uruguayan right, however, does not forgive Mujica for what others value as positive attributes. In a gesture of utmost disdain, former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995) of the Partido Nacional (PN or Blancos) referred to the president's modest house as "that cave." And former President Jorge Battle (2000-2005) of the Partido Colorado (PC) said, "We have an unpresentable president," while Gerardo Zambrano, one of the most faithful exponents of large ranching interests, said he was "very ashamed to have this person as president."

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