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Uruguayan Politics Heats Up 11 Months Before Election

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Although Uruguayan political parties still have seven months to select candidates in open, obligatory, simultaneous primaries, and the general election is 11 months away, people are already talking about who might rule the country for the five years from March 2015 to March 2020 (NotiSur, May 20, 2005).

Both upcoming elections are already hot topics with pollsters hazarding predictions of victors in both the internal party and general elections. The possibility that the progressive Frente Amplio (FA) could continue governing the country for a third consecutive term has sparked worried conservative and rightist sectors—the traditional Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) and Partido Colorado (PC)—to spring into action. In addition, seven small parties have filed to register for the elections.

Those voting in the Blanco and Colorado primaries will be able to choose among many candidates who use their own strength to throw hats into the ring. Each candidate informs the electorate how he would govern if elected president as neither the PN nor the PC has a government administration plan.

Elections set for last Sunday of October 2014

The FA, in power since 2005, handles primaries differently. Its party congress, made up of 1,700 delegates from the entire country, last month agreed to put the names of ex-President Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) and Sen. Constanza Moreira on the primary ballot next June 1. Whichever candidate wins the primary will present the same government program developed by a team of experts.

As for efforts by the seven new parties to register, never before have so many groups collected the required number of signatures to seek electoral registration (0.5% of the national electorate of 2.6 million voters). But far from enriching Uruguayan democracy, if all are granted registration, the increased number of contending parties will weaken democracy.

Proposals written into the statutes of one of the parties seeking registration calls for "boosting forced labor for delinquent minors." Other groups call for absolving the dictatorship of past wrongdoing "as a necessary and inevitable option" or creating "a state that in the long term is formed by police, the judiciary, and the armed forces." There are also groups that indicate that it is important "to prohibit the use of genetically-modified seeds because if we eat healthy we will heal society"; others who propose "defending basic principles such as the neutrality of the Internet"; or others who proclaim that "a life of love is better and marriage should become a private contract between two or more individuals."

US consultants hired

For the first time in the history of Uruguayan elections, foreign consultants have been brought in to aid a political campaign.
The Washington-based consulting firm GMMB recently landed in Montevideo to advise rightist Sen. Pedro Bordaberry, a leading contender inside the PC (NotiSur, July 26, 2013). The firm launched its marketing plan Nov. 9 when the Bordaberry presented himself as a pre-candidate. The candidate, however, did not reveal he had hired the foreign advisors until El País, an established morning daily with links to the Blancos, reported the arrival of a group of political scientists and communications experts from Washington. Bordaberry’s campaign committee then had to explain that GMMB experts Frank Greer and Maru Becker will travel to Montevideo once a month, accompanied by Ecuadoran political scientist Roberto Izurieta Cánova.

As the elections near, GMMB will set up a permanent team in the Uruguayan capital. Local consultants did not provide other details about the contract signed with the US firm. However, the GMMB’s Web site indicates services include guidance on overall campaign creativity, publicity placement, identification of voters and audiences, speech writing, and advice on how to interact with candidates of other parties. Particularly noteworthy is the firm’s experience in social media given that Bordaberry was the first Uruguayan politician to use Twitter to communicate his opinions and connect with followers regarding parliamentary sessions.

GMMB says it provides candidates with a crisis committee to meet the challenge of difficult races that experts say can’t be won. Its elections Web page states, "We pick tough fights and win. We’re proud of our role in historic victories that inspired nations—Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela. We’ve achieved odds-defying victories, like helping Sen. Reid and Sen. Boxer weather the 2010 storm, and helping Donna Edwards turn her upstart congressional campaign into a national progressive cause."

Consultants Greer and Becker reportedly worked on the Clinton and Obama campaigns, and Greer also advised Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 1994. Previously Greer worked with a coalition of Chilean political parties that opposed dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) remaining in power. Ex-President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic and former President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012) of Guatemala used Greer's services before he became an advisor to Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes.

Izurieta Cánova, political management professor at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, and frequent commentator on CNN television, has advised several candidates before. He has done such campaign work only in Latin America. During the first decade of this century, Izurieta Cánova was a frequent visitor to Argentina where he conducted a series of seminars sponsored by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Japan’s Agency for International Cooperation, and The George Washington University. At all those events—and this is what pertains to Uruguay—Izurieta Cánova was accompanied by teaching colleague Jaime Durán Barba, who, like Izurieta, is a political scientist from Ecuador. Izurieta and Duran Barba share the Washington University teaching post. Durán Barba, who is an advisor to rightist Mauricio Macri, mayor of the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, is considered an expert in "dirty campaigns." Durán Barba is known in Uruguay for his work with the Argentine right making the presence of his colleague Izurieta Cánova as a Bordaberry advisor a matter of concern.

Meanwhile, Bordaberry said he hired the foreign team of advisors "to give added value and an outside perspective to the campaign."
Former FA president likely victor

Everything now points to the FA winning a third consecutive term next October with the most likely candidate being former President Vázquez. According to polls, even together the other three parties with parliamentary representation will be unable to outnumber the FA. It also appears, however, that the outcome will not be decided in a first round. Certain unity of the opposition in a runoff makes it difficult to project final numbers and percentages.

When it came time for voting in the last presidential elections, Blancos and Colorados united in an effort to defeat the FA (NotiSur, Nov. 6, 2009, and April 30, 2010). In municipal elections—held seven months after the general election and in which there was only one round of voting—the opposition united officially in four districts to successfully defeat the ruling party.

Opposition fights in various arenas

The opposition has thus "perfected" this way of combating progressive politics. Deputy Yerú Pardiñas, secretary general of the Partido Socialista—the second-strongest party of the progressive alliance—says it has already taken the battle to other arenas such as the legal system and rural entrepreneurship.

"The Suprema Corte de Justicia [SCJ]—a judicial governing body that should be absolutely impartial—has recently acted against the government and the Constitution, protecting the rights of powerful groups," Pardiñas said. "It has defended private interests over the general interest of the country. This occurred when the FA and President José Mujica tried to benefit the general interest by establishing a tax on rural property—the Impuesto a la Concentración de Inmuebles Rurales (ICIR)—to protect resources where there is a concentration of wealth. The ICIR undoubtedly would have been levied on the richest. The court declared it unconstitutional, like it earlier ruled unconstitutional a small tax charged to rural producers and earmarked for primary education that had long been paid by property owners of any property ... and it also declared unconstitutional the right to continue judging crimes against humanity committed during the dictatorship."

The socialist deputy said, "There’s no doubt that the right is repositioning itself, which implies they are looking for any way to restore their power. That sector of society is setting itself up in various areas: major business organizations, through SCJ decisions, and by involving its most notorious leaders such as the Blanco’s former presidential candidate Gonzalo Aguirre, who helped prepare the constitutional challenge of the ICIR tax."

On Oct. 28, the opposition took a big step that confirmed Pardiña’s view. That day, Blancos and Colorados joined forces as the Partido de la Concertación to try to push the Frente Amplio out of the municipal administration of the nation’s capital.

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