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Uruguay’s Conservative Parties Unite
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Uruguay’s two conservative parties—opponents for their entire 177-year existence—have joined forces to defeat the Frente Amplio (FA), which has governed Montevideo, the national capital, for the past 25 years (NotiSur, Nov. 28, 1989). The unprecedented alliance—motivated by the certainty that neither the Partido Colorado (PC) nor the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) could defeat the ruling progressive administration alone—is remarkable because the two parties have been on opposite sides of prolonged and bloody civil wars three different times.

On Jan. 9, electoral authorities authorized unification of the two parties under the name Partido de la Concertación. Previously, several Colorado leaders had resigned because of exhausting internal strife related to this issue. The new party’s goal is to oust the Frente Amplio and recover control of the capital, home to nearly half the country’s 3.3 million inhabitants.

In a controversial decision, the Corte Electoral approved registration of the party created to take back the primacy, which it lost more than two decades ago, in the next municipal elections in 2015. In 1990, the election of Tabaré Vázquez, a medical oncologist, as mayor of Montevideo broke the Partido Colorado’s quasi-monopoly maintained even in the years of the dictatorship (1973-1985) when the party of former Presidents Julio María Sanguinetti (1985-1990, 1995-2000) and Jorge Batlle Ibáñez (2000-2005) assigned top leaders to serve the de facto regime. The Blancos governed the capital just once—between 1959 and 1963. Vázquez later served as president from 2005-2010.

The two parties, now united as the Concertación, were born as twins during the 1836 civil war when troops identified themselves with red or white armbands and headbands in the Sept. 19 battle on the banks of the Arroyo Carpintería in the central department of Durazno.

Frente Amplio strong despite mayor’s decline
Following five consecutive administrations in Montevideo, Mayor Ana Olivera, a teacher raised in the political and union life of the Partido Comunista, became a symbol of power. However, she currently suffers a persistent opposition that originated in the traditional parties but manifests itself in the media, now virtually monopolized by the right.

In a country in which security, health, and education—the three points that throughout Latin America are the main citizen concerns—are now administered by a central power, attacks against Olivera have focused on waste collection, plagued by boycotts and sabotages as opponents mount up trash on street corners or destroy trash bins distributed throughout the city. Despite these problems and the mayor’s deteriorating image, polls still show 53% to 58% of Montevideo’s population continues to support the Frente Amplio; 30% are undecided; and between 12% and 17% would support the Concertación.

Alliance controversial among Colorados
The proposal for the Partido de la Concertación alliance—which emerged following the 2010 elections—was well-received among Blancos but sparked sharp disagreements among Colorados.
The leadership of both conservative parties, however, carried the project forward. At first they discussed the possibility of presenting one candidate under the Unión Cívica banner, named for a small Catholic group that joined the Blancos in 2009. This test of electoral engineering did not work because it would have required the Unión Cívica to dissolve.

The membership of both the Blancos and Colorados tried to avoid formation of a joint party proposed by their main leaders. Although there had never been major differences between the parties, old grudges strengthened by the memory of thousands of civil-war deaths has long created strong feelings of identity that have been passed on generation to generation.

To justify the existence of the two parties, the Colorados identified with business leaders and the export sector, while the Blancos represented the power of large landowners. In time, the antinomy changed: the Colorados became spokespersons of capital and of the finance and industrial sectors, while the other party spoke on behalf of agriculture. Historians reject those descriptors and tend to use the issue of identity to explain the existence of either party.

"Montevideo, as well as Uruguay with its political maturity, do not deserve something so small as a new party born without programmatic proposals and simply created to oppose someone," said Daniel Martínez, former industry minister and the Frente Amplio’s likely candidate to head the Montevideo government in the next elections.

"There’s nothing to be embarrassed about or to regret," said Blanco Deputy Jorge Gandini, who competes against the Colorado’s Ney Castillo for the Concertación nomination. "The country comes first and that’s why we’ve decided for the time being to forget the differences that have divided us for a century and a half. ... Throwing the Frente Amplio out of power is worth anything. This is an historic mandate."

A more poetic expression came during the public launching of the new party when Castillo affirmed respective political identities. Refuting the ironic criticism that a "pink party" had been created by joining Blanco (white) and Colorado (red) parties, he said, "The whites will continue as white as a wild horse’s bones and we reds will remain like the blood of a brave bull." The images of a horse and a bull are still vibrantly alive in old rural communities where the civil wars were fought, but in the Facebook-Twitter era they have to be explained to younger generations.

Yerú Pardiñas, secretary general of the Partido Socialista, the strongest element within the Frente Amplio today, said, "The right will do anything to try to rebuild its power and uses business chambers and the power of the Suprema Courte de Justicia. It now shows its lack of imagination by creating this Concertación that lacks both ideology and platform."

It was not easy for the Corte Electoral to grant legal standing to the new party. The electoral body —made up of eight members (four designated by the Frente Amplio, plus two Colorados and two Blancos) and presided by Ronald Herbert, a neutral member—is charged by the country’s Constitution to "enforce the rules and laws above political considerations." The president votes only to break a tie when the eight other members can’t reach agreement.

When Herbert was called upon to break a deadlock, he did not hesitate to give the Partido de la Concertación a clear road ahead. His vote, however, did not follow the law. Electoral norms state precisely that a person who belongs to a party, or who was a candidate for that party, can appear in...
another party only after a two-year period in which the person "proves conclusively" his lack of ties with the previous one.

In this case, the 22 people submitting the request to create the Partido de la Concertación are still at the helm of the political groups that once fought at Carpintería. This failure to meet the requirements would be enough for the Frente Amplio to challenge the creation of the new party and ask electoral officials to nullify its decision. The ruling party announced it would not do so.

Justifying his decision in favor of the new party, Herbert argued that he did not doubt the honor of the 22 who had requested the Concertación’s recognition. He also said he was "sure that they would renounce membership in their original parties."

Deputy Sandra Etcheverry, one of the Blancos on the court, expressed a similar view. "They are honorable persons, with longtime political involvement, and they know quite well what they are doing," she said.

José Korzeniak, a constitutionalist and professor at the state Universidad de la República, said that the resolution authorizing the formation of the new party is invalid because "it violates all norms in the matter." The most serious thing for the proponents of the "test-tube party," as the daily La República contemptuously calls the Concertación, is that the two leading experts on electoral issues within the Partido Colorado have the same opinion as the four Frente Amplio members of the court as well as Korzeniak. For that reason, the president and secretary-general of the party electoral commission, Miguel Rodríguez and Leonardo Martín, resigned the party and their positions. Both had been active party members since their youth.

Similarly, groups within the party object to "our party, born under the slogan of defending the law, breaking the law just because it doesn't like the free expression of citizens who say that they want to be governed by a party that isn’t ours."

Such is the case of Deputy Fernando Amado, secretary-general of the Colorados of Montevideo, who said the creation of a new party is "a serious historic error [because] it destroys Colorado identity and ideology."

These ethical problems do not exist in the Partido Blanco.

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