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Tabaré Vázquez Back as Uruguay’s President, Reflecting Region’s Progressive Trend

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With the Vázquez victory, an electoral cycle that began in Bolivia and continued in Brazil, Uruguayan historian and political scientist Gerardo Caetano says countries of the region have ratified a government model focusing on defending the country’s resources to finance social-inclusion policies that are wiping out poverty in the Southern Cone (NotiSur, May 30, 2014, and Dec. 5, 2014).

The breakup of two old parties, the Blanco (or Nacional) and the Colorado, both born in 1836 in the shadow of civil wars; the failure of a policy of alliance that led those parties to a shared decline in voting; and the growth of the FA even in areas that until now had been adverse has led many analysts and political leaders to say that the country has taken "a turn to the left." Next May, when municipal elections are scheduled, the FA’s control could be virtually complete.

Future comes in two stages

From now on, it will be necessary to separate what’s ahead into two chapters. On March 1, 2015, Vázquez—or simply Tabaré as he’s popularly called—will assume the presidency. Then, at the national level, rather than what people are calling a turn to the left, one can expect more of the same, a continuity that will allow the gradual ongoing development of the FA program. "No major changes, simply continuity, and that’s no small thing when we have seen that the country grows and that those who have long been disadvantaged become full citizens," the political scientist Esteban Valenti wrote in the Montevideo Portal Web site.

The other chapter will begin to unfold next May 10 when governors (intendentes) in the country’s 19 departments are elected. That’s when a new political map will begin to take shape in which the FA could end up governing 12 of those departments, eight more than it already has. The FA could become the dominant player in the entire national political scene. Another defeat in the municipal elections could prove fatal for the Blanco and Colorado parties, both badly hurt in the presidential elections of October/November. It could be particularly bad for the Colorados.

Vázquez more moderate

"Tabaré has everything going for him, and he can deepen the process of change that he began in 2005 and that [President] José Mujica has continued until now. But he won’t do it; we know that he is a moderate, a consensus candidate elected to be able to beat the Blancos and Colorados. And we also know that he is ideologically far removed from the Uruguayan left’s original program,"
said Deputy Luis Puig, leader of the Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo, aligned with the FA’s most progressive wing.

By saying, "Tabaré has everything in his favor," Puig referred to the strong legitimacy of the party in power: 1) the FA has its own majority in the legislature; 2) the FA grew throughout the country, penetrating even in rural areas that previously were elusive; 3) the FA is expected to emerge as the big winner in May municipal elections; 4) the FA won presidential elections for a third-consecutive time, something that has not occurred since the first half of the last century when the Partido Colorado was dominant; 5) Vázquez won the presidency with the highest percentage of votes in Uruguay’s history; and 6) the Blancos and Colorados, who had expected to win the October-November elections, not only were plunged into a bloody internal debate but their chances for May fell to a few departments.

"There is no reason why the next government won’t make as many gains as the previous administration," wrote Gabriel Delacoste, an analyst with the independent weekly Brecha.

When Puig said, "Tabaré won’t deepen the process," he was referring to the paradoxical situation in which the progressive party put a conservative president in power. This was clear in the first FA administration when Vázquez confronted fellow party members and the rest of Latin America by supporting the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) backed by then US President George W. Bush, and agreeing to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US, following the steps that, until then, only Mexico had taken when it joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The person who supported those two positions was Vice President Danilo Astori, who was minister of the economy in the first Vázquez administration (NotiSur, Oct. 27, 2006). Astori’s reappointment to his former post has been approved. He will return with two ideas that are harbingers of a difficult internal debate. For one, Astori proposes changes to the structure of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) that would allow partners to sign trade agreements outside MERCOSUR (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 1992, July 31, 1998, and Aug. 30, 2002). In addition, to satisfy the demands of the business community, he supports closer relations with the Alianza del Pacífico (AP) formed by Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico (SourceMex, June 20, 2012), which, with its openness to neoliberalism, is seen as MERCOSUR's enemy (NotiSur, Dec. 2, 2005). Uruguay already has observer status in the AP.

After having lived through six months of intense electoral activity—campaigning began in June with primary elections for presidential candidates—Uruguay now faces another five months of active political life to last until the municipal elections. Following an end-of-the-year hiatus for the holidays, new members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate will be installed on Feb. 15 and the president-elect will take office March 1. After that, the Blancos and Colorados will campaign for the May 10 elections through the Partido de la Concertación, formed to end the historical differences between the two conservative parties. They believed the new party would end 25 years of progressive municipal governments in Montevideo. However, that is impossible because the FA was 20 percentage points above the combined results for the Blancos and Colorados in the October/November elections (NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014).

**Polls distort opinion trends**

With the recently achieved victory, analyst Aníbal Corti was the first to speak about the FA’s real or imagined turn to the left, since "the Uruguay in which we live isn’t the country with strong
conservative elements of the past described by the media, polls, and some political leaders." Corti’s analysis, described in a Dec. 2 edition of the morning newspaper La Diaria, states, "For a great many, Oct. 26 spelled the end of an illusion, those who had lived in a type of bubble, an imaginary reality. There is a certain consensus among analysts that the election results show that the true Uruguay is more leftist that what most people believe." He added, "For some that was a wonderful surprise; for others, a terrible realization."

With a degree of irony, Corti summarized that, "for nearly everyone, it was something like the collapse of a fantasy world, because until then they believed that they were living in a country that does not, in fact, exist."

The analyst asked, just as did some of his colleagues, what led people to believe that things were different than they actually are. His response was, "Evidently, it had something to do with opinion polls—not just election surveys but general polls, which through the years contributed to Uruguayans developing mistaken ideas about what we think on many important public issues."

Corti cited the case of three polls, each, in turn, predicting strong public disapproval of the FA for having passed three laws that legalized abortion in specific circumstances, allowed same-sex marriage, and regulated cannabis consumption. The three laws approved during President Mujica’s administration did not have a negative impact at election time but instead had the exact opposite effect than pollsters had imagined.

"In summary, for years the polls have described Uruguayan public opinion as systematically biased in favor of the most conservative, or furthest to-the-right, positions. These public-opinion companies have convinced us that we were living in a country that, in the end, was shown to be nonexistent," Corti concluded, thus explaining a desire that until then had been only latent in a good part of the nearly 54% of Uruguayans who voted for the FA candidate: the turn toward the left.

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