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## **‘Pink Party’ Experiment Falls Flat for Uruguay’s Reeling Right**

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Recent departmental elections in Uruguay confirmed the growing strength of the governing Frente Amplio (FA), a progressive coalition in power since 2005, and underscored just how much the two conservative parties that dominated the small country beforehand have fallen, vote after vote, into discredit.

The Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) and Partido Colorado (PC) were born in 1836 amid the clash of war unleashed by the ambitions of their civilian caudillos. They lost control of the country nearly two centuries later, in 2005, when the FA began the first of its three consecutive presidencies and also managed to capture a few departmental governorships ([NotiSur, March 4, 2005](#), and [May 20, 2005](#)).

Their troubles continued on May 10, when voters went to the polls to choose intendentes (governors) and legislative assemblies for the country’s 19 departments. The elections raised major questions about the leadership and future of the two parties (above all the PC), which were particularly embarrassed by the strong showing, in Montevideo, of a nonaffiliated businessman with undisguised right-wing nationalist ideas.

The FA, in contrast, had reason to celebrate, especially its victory in the Montevideo intendente race, which was won by a relatively new face, something the coalition, founded in 1971 and still dominated by its original, retirement-aged leaders, desperately needs as it looks toward the next round of elections in 2019. The FA began this past election cycle with victories in the first- and second-round presidential contests, held last October and November, respectively ([NotiSur, Nov. 14, 2014](#), and [Dec. 12, 2014](#)). The governing coalition completed the cycle by winning six governorships in last month’s local elections. The PN won 12. The once-powerful PC finished with just one.

Prior to 2005, with the exception of just two presidential periods, the PC had sole control of the national government, including in times of dictatorship (because the dictators were also Colorados). Departmental governorships, in the meantime, were divided practically in half between the PC and PN—until 1990, when the FA took control of Montevideo, Uruguay’s capital city and home to more than half its eligible voters. The PC remained a force to be reckoned with even after that, winning seven governorships in 1995. Its decline began with the next election, in 2000, when it won five governorships. The party lost even more ground in 2005, winning just one governorship. It took two in 2010, but, following last month’s contests, again found itself with only one.

### ***Rising stars***

The new intendente of Montevideo will be Daniel Martínez, a 58-year-old engineer with a rich political trajectory. As a young man, at the height of the last dictatorship (1973-1985), he headed the federation of university students. He later served as a union delegate in ANCAP, the state oil company, eventually presiding over the firm during the FA’s first term in power. He then served the

same government as minister of industry. More recently, he held a seat in the Senate. He won the May 10 contest with 53.2% of the vote, 7.3% more than the outgoing governor, Ana Olivera, the first woman intendente in Uruguayan history.

Martínez is a member of the Partido Socialista (PS), the second-largest of the FA's 30 different political groups. Because of the electoral significance that Montevideo represents, and because of the public exposure he will receive as governor of the capital city, Martínez is being hailed a key figure in the progressive alliance's generational renewal. Another rising star for the FA is Vice President Raúl Sendic, 52, a graduate in human genetics from the Universidad de La Habana in Cuba, whose famous father, also named Raúl Sendic, was a legendary guerilla fighter.

Two years ago, convinced that neither, on their own, would be able to beat the FA in Montevideo, the PN and PC joined forces to create the Partido de la Concertación ([NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014](#), and [March 6, 2015](#)), more popularly known as the "pink party," a humorous reference to the color that comes from mixing colorado (red) and blanco (white). The strategy proved to be a disaster.

The two parties each presented a candidate under the Concertación banner. They were joined by a third candidate, independent Edgardo Novick, a powerful businessman who, out of his own pocket and with the help of "friends" he never identified, mounted a massive publicity campaign marked by nationalist language better suited for the Cold War era. At one point he went so far as to call FA members "filthy communists."

Of the 330,000 votes captured by the Partido de la Concertación, 64.3% went to Novick, who, much to the chagrin of the PN and PC leadership, seems to have developed a lasting taste for politics. "I liked this," he said. "And since my companies are doing so well on their own, I promise to continue working with an eye toward the future." The traditional parties have already made it clear they won't again allow Novick to use the Concertación banner, meaning he'll have to create his own party.

The defeat prompted the Blancos and Colorados to enter into a period of reflection, which, in the case of the former, has led to questions regarding the leadership of Luis Lacalle Pou, the PN's presidential candidate last year. Some in the party want Jorge Larrañaga, Lacalle Pou's running mate, to take the reins. Driving the debate is that candidates Larrañaga supported in the May 10 elections fared better among Blanco voters than candidates backed by Lacalle Pou. Tensions have risen so high within the PN that one of its senators, Verónica Alonso, faces a possible intraparty ethics sanction for agreeing to join a committee of "notables" that President Tabaré Vázquez put together to plan measures to fight alcohol abuse.

## *Colorado catastrophe*

The misguided Partido de la Concertación strategy, with which the two old parties thought they could just come together, with no common program, and challenge a coalition whose 30-member factions have supported a joint program since 1971 and updated it year to year, took a particularly heavy toll on the PC. Already in March, two months before the local elections, the party's ethics commission began threatening harsh sanctions against a dozen legislators who had said they would not vote for the "pink party." Later, on the night of the election, with the results still coming in, the PC's 2014 presidential candidate Pedro Bordaberry—the son of Juan María Bordaberry, Uruguay's first civilian dictator (1973-1976)—announced his resignation as the party's leader. He did not, however, give up his Senate seat.

Bordaberry considered himself responsible not only because of the failed Concertación experiment, which he had supported, but because the party's vote haul decreased throughout the country. The only governorship that did go the PC's way was won by a sector at odds with Bordaberry. The party lost the gubernatorial race in which Bordaberry's October running mate participated.

"A long period of suffering finally came to an end," Deputy Fernando Amado, the top vote-getter among the PC's legislative candidates last October, wrote May 11 in an open letter. "This is the end of the penance that society imposed on us for continuing to embrace the powerful and forgetting about the people who have their votes but nothing else."

Amado blamed the debacle on Bordaberry and on the PC's last two presidents: Julio María Sanguinetti (1985-1990 and 1995-2000) and Jorge Batlle Ibáñez (2000-2005). "We were taken over by a spirit of revenge that we exercised with pride and defiance to demonize the Frente Amplio and turn it into our enemy. The Partido Colorado was beaten by a revengeful spirit in which Sanguinetti and Batlle played the starring roles with particular determination," Amado wrote in his letter, which the Blanco newspaper *El País*, a Montevideo daily, described as "an epitaph to be inscribed on the tomb of the Partido Colorado."

Sanguinetti, now 80 and considered by many to have lost some of his intellectual faculties, maintains a close relationship with a group of right-leaning newspapers headed by Spain's *El País*. Batlle, 89, has been the butt of jokes in recent years for his repeated slips of the tongue.

"It defies belief that our leaders—Bordaberry, Sanguinetti, and Batlle—continue describing the world in Cold War terms, trying to uncover Marxists hidden at every turn," wrote Amado, a lawmaker many analysts expect will end up leaving the PC and joining the FA. "While Raúl Castro and Barack Obama shake hands in front of the whole world, [the old Colorado leaders] go around accusing the Frente Amplio leaders of being communists, dictators, totalitarians, and bigots. They can't seem to understand that the people who replaced us in power aren't the old Russian tanks, or the bearded [rebels] of the Sierra Maestra, or the Bolsheviks preparing to seize our means of production. We were replaced by a political organization that knew how to build up its legitimacy."

-- End --