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Uruguay’s Governing Alliance Deeply Divided over Foreign Policy

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Nearly a half-century ago, Uruguay, led at the time by the conservative Partido Colorado (PC), gave up what until recently had been its last executive position in an intergovernmental organization. In 1968, and after 12 years with the Organization of American States (OAS), jurist José Mora Otero stepped down as secretary general amid a wave of criticism for the institutional and personal support he gave to the US invasion and military occupation (1965-1966) of the Dominican Republic. Two decades earlier, also when the PC was in charge, Uruguay held a seat in the UN Security Council and, thanks to the work of diplomat Enrique Rodríguez Fabregat, played a decisive role in the creation of Israel (1948).

All these years later, Uruguay, now governed by the progressive Frente Amplio (FA), was finally able to reprise its leadership role in the OAS when Luis Almagro, a former minister of foreign affairs, took over May 26 as the organization’s new secretary general. Additionally, the country is set to begin a new stint next month as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Presumably a point of pride for the tiny South American nation, the high profile international positions are also proving to be problematic, particularly for the governing FA, whose various left wing components are clashing over foreign policy. Some coalition members take issue with the turn President Tabaré Vázquez has taken regarding US relations and regional integration. They also criticize Almagro’s early OAS record, along with the role Uruguay will presumably play in the UN Security Council, as going against the left’s traditional commitment to non-intervention and self-determination.

“He bought himself a conflict”

The position of OAS secretary general is usually seen as prize that is awarded to an individual, Almagro in this case, and does not, therefore, imply any kind of special commitment from that individual’s country of origin. But while that may be the case, it is also true that Almagro, who until March 2014 was Uruguay’s foreign affairs minister and thus a visible face of the FA administration of President José Mujica (2010-2015), hails from a specific political context (NotiSur, April 10, 2015). It was Mujica’s enormous worldwide popularity, after all, that propelled Almagro toward the OAS post. Former President Mujica also set up Uruguay’s upcoming term in the Security Council.

The first internal skirmishes took place in August and September, when FA member parties forced Vázquez and his foreign affairs minister, Rodolfo Nin Novoa, to stop negotiating entrance into the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA), an international treaty being pushed by some of the largest US and European service sector corporations (NotiSur, May 1, 2015). Nin announced on Sept. 7 that the administration was officially putting an end to the process (NotiSur, Oct. 2, 2015).

Nin was back in the news seven weeks later when, in an Oct. 26 interview with the radio station El Espectador de Montevideo, he offered a first hint regarding how the Vázquez administration might approach its Security Council role. He did so by delving straight into one of the biggest hot-
button issues of the moment: the fight against terrorism, and in particular against the Islamic State, or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Speaking personally, but in the context of an official visit to France, Nin turned explicitly to a subject – the Middle East, not terrorism – from which not only the left, but Uruguay’s entire political system has kept a careful distance. “I think the response to ISIS has to be international, collective. We need to put an end to this madness,” he said. “We support firm, decided action, a fighting brigade. Not from Uruguay, because it doesn’t have the elements to do so. But conceptually speaking, I believe this is the alternative.”

Nin went on to say something that irked just about every political group in the country. “We’ll now be in the UN Security Council, and this is one of the principal challenges we face: world peace, preventing conflicts, finding peaceful solutions – except when it comes to this terrorism thing,” he said. “Here’s there’s no possibility of a peaceful solution, because on the other side, there’s no capacity for reasoning.”

The comments drew a swift rebuke from Mujica, who said they were interpreted across the globe as support, by an upcoming Security Council member, for military action. “Foreign Affairs Minister Nin went to France, one of the countries together with the United States that bombed Iraq with UN consent, and he bought himself a conflict, he turned Uruguay into a potential terrorism target,” the former president remarked. The Partido Comunista spoke out as well: “Nin’s opinion is frivolous, besides being dangerous, because we shouldn’t fall into the absurdity of supporting the interventionist policies of the CIA and the governments of the United States and Israel, which in the past unleashed what have become today’s demons.”

FA leaders see Nin’s comments as an indicator of how Uruguay plans to proceed geopolitically and a sign of the government’s desire to insert itself internationally by joining the US-backed Pacific Alliance (PA) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trading blocs. “With the foreign affairs minister’s words, the country abandons its political tradition of non-alignment and looks instead to ride the coattails of the United States and European Union,” journalist Víctor Hugo Abelando wrote in a Nov. 5 article in the Uruguayan weekly Brecha. Days later, on Nov. 13, France was hit by a devastating series of terror attacks attributed to ISIS.

Almagro’s letters
In the meantime, Uruguay’s various political forces, and the FA in particular, have also taken issue with Almagro, in this case because of his handling of events in Venezuela, which held legislative elections Dec. 6. The elections were won by the opposition, which Almagro, the OAS secretary general, seemed to favor through repeated references he made beforehand.

Almagro is not accountable in any direct way to the Vázquez administration. But he does face pressure from the FA, which let it be known that if he wants to remain in the progressive alliance, he must at least minimally accept its principles regarding self-determination and non-interference in the affairs of other countries. The FA insists that Almagro, by penning three open letters to the government of Venezuela, “grossly intervened in the electoral process of a country that is a friend of Uruguay, its government and the Frente Amplio.” In the letters, Almagro praised Venezuela as having “one of the best-quality electoral processes” but said the government there “uses it antidemocratically for its own benefit.”
Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro responded on Nov. 26 with one of his typical outbursts, calling Almagro “trash.” Almagro suffered a far bigger hit several days earlier, on Nov. 19, when former President Mujica, his political mentor, broke relations with him in a short e-mail made public by the weekly Búsqueda. Mujica didn't mince words. “I regret the path you’ve taken and I know it’s irreversible,” he wrote. “That’s why, right now, formally, I bid you farewell.”

Two weeks later, it was revealed that the four Uruguayan experts Almagro had appointed as his special advisers also parted ways with the OAS secretary general. The people in question are Luis Rosadilla, Mujica’s defense minister; Diego Cánepa, also a top Cabinet official in the last administration; Leonel Briozzo, a former deputy health minister; and Luis Porto, Almagro’s right-hand man during his tenure in the Foreign Affairs Ministry. The four belong to different sectors of the FA.

On Dec. 4, in an interview with Brecha, Sen. Constanza Moreira (FA) criticized Nin and Almagro in equal measure, but put a special accent on her remarks about Almagro, perhaps because in addition to their old political affiliation, they also shared a long personal relationship. With biting sarcasm, she said she had received a document with “the letters Almagro didn’t write,” the ones about “all the political leaders who were murdered in Latin America between June and November.” Moreira said that, instead of talking constantly about Venezuela, Almagro might have spoken about Mexico, “where the graves are overflowing with corpses.”

Among the activists and local leaders included on Moreira’s long list were Rubén Espinosa, a Mexican journalist murdered July 31 (SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2015); Gleydson Carvalho, a Brazilian journalist gunned down Aug. 6, two months after the violent deaths of two colleagues prompted the Associação Nacional de Jornais, Brazil’s national newspaper association, to complain to the OAS about “a climate of impunity guaranteed by a corrupt judiciary”; Colombian journalist Flor Alba Núñez, killed Sept. 10; four candidates for Paraguay’s Nov. 15 municipal elections; and four mayoral candidates for the June 7 elections in Mexico. One of them, Aidé Nava, was decapitated. The Mexican campesino leader Avelino Martínez was murdered Dec. 6 in Oaxaca – after Sen. Moreira’s interview with Brecha. Almagro hasn’t written any letters about him either.

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