Conservatives Undermine Uruguay’s Government

Andrés Gaudàn

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by Andrés Gaudín
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Just as in other South American countries with progressive presidents, right-wing parties in Uruguay are on the offensive. Using a media campaign intended to heighten a sense of insecurity triggered by violent crimes, the principal leaders of Uruguay’s two established conservative parties are working to discredit top government officials. They continue, in vain, with calls to censure Interior Minister Eduardo Bonomi, determined to force President Tabaré Vázquez to ask for Bonomi’s resignation and call for early elections.

An unsigned Oct. 5 editorial in La República stated, “In what is a copy of previous situations—this is the third motion to censure the minister—the right-wingers always react in the same way, calling for Bonomi’s head as well as [the removal of] those working under him.”

Blancos, Colorados seek early elections

The leaders of the two parties that have held power through much of Uruguay’s history—the National Party (also called Blanco) and the Colorado Party (NotiSur, June 5, 2015)—are attempting to establish the idea that Uruguayan democracy, the oldest and perhaps the most solid in the region, is in trouble, and that the country’s problems would only be remedied with the dissolution of Congress and early elections. That’s what former Colorado presidential candidate Pedro Bordaberry said. He was seconded by two top Blanco party leaders, Senators Luis Lacalle Pou and Jorge Larrañaga (NotiSur, May 23, 2014).

Alarms went off immediately. “We should begin to speak in a straightforward manner about the right-wing plans to overturn the government,” Sen. Mónica Xavier said on Oct. 6. Xavier was executive president of the ruling Frente Amplio (FA) through the middle of this year.

The “right-wing plans” that Xavier and other political leaders denounced came after a six-month period of consultations in which President Vázquez sought consensus on a package of anti-crime measures. The two traditional parties participated in the discussions—out of which eight proposals emerged and six have already received legislative attention. Bordaberry and Lacalle sent their representatives but did not participate. At every step, they criticized the unprecedented action, which the government and the rest of the opposition, including Blanco and minority Colorado sectors, described as very positive.

The right-wing offensive was sparked by the shooting death of a retired sailor, Heriberto Prati, on Oct. 1. Three days later, on Oct. 4, Bordaberry, the eldest son of the former dictator Juan María Bordaberry (1972-1976), called for Bonomi’s censure and began promoting the idea of a new election.

“What he is doing is damaging democracy with his statements,” Xavier said. “Bordaberry is a scholarly legislator and an old politician who can’t be unaware of the negative effect his talk has. It must be made clear, and the senator knows this, that just because the Constitution includes a mechanism for early elections, it doesn’t mean that it can or should be employed any time and under any circumstance.” Indirectly calling him a coup proponent, Xavier added, “The only thing that Bordaberry may be looking for is what he did not get at the ballot box, and if he is not aware of
the seriousness of what he said, the best thing would be for him to leave the Senate, to resign and dedicate himself to something else.”

Bordaberry was not alone in launching his campaign. He was followed by Lacalle, the most representative figure of the Blanco party. In his eagerness to take advantage of the natural wearing down the Frente Amplio has suffered over three consecutive terms in power, Lacalle joined the Colorado senator with a series of commentaries, speaking “audaciously between the lines,” as the weekly Brecha wrote on Oct. 7. The paper reproduced something Lacalle said in an event in the city of Florida, 87 km north of Montevideo. In the same tone used by the Venezuelan opposition to refer to President Nicolás Maduro’s government (NotiSur, May 3, 2013, June 6, 2014, Aug. 26, 2016), Lacalle said, “We should understand that we have a government in retreat, and what we have to do is to help it come to an end. It’s not that they come to an end, it’s that we have to help them to get out, because if left up to them, this is not going to end well.”

At the same event, Ruben Hartmann, a retired colonel and Blanco party official, spoke as enigmatically as the party leader, ending his speech by repeating twice, “We are beginning our return.”

Lacalle did not correct or disavow the colonel, an active participant in the repression of the dictatorship era (1973-1985). Nor did he disown hundreds of his supporters who had gathered at his house the day before with the slogan of promoting a “monthly civic strike against the dictatorship of the FA.”

**Dispute over safety**

The third time Bordaberry requested Bonomi’s censure, he made a surprising statement: “Uruguay is today the most insecure country of the region.” Citing statistics from his team of advisers, he said, “In Montevideo, a person is three times more likely to be murdered than in Buenos Aires [Argentina], and the Uruguayan capital has a crime rate higher than that of São Paulo: 14 per 100 thousand inhabitants versus 11 per 100 thousand for the very violent Brazilian city.” As for armed robbery, the senator did not give numbers, but said, “All indexes for the last 15 years were exceeded.”

The government does not deny the existence of violent crime; it agrees with the opposition that it is one of the most serious problems Uruguayan society is facing. But government numbers differ radically from those cited by the Colorado senator.

“They lie repeatedly because their objective isn’t to help combat crime but to wear down the government and the Frente Amplio to see if they can get what the ballot boxes have denied them since 2004, when we ended the nefarious alliance of Colorados and Blancos that had been in place since the beginning of [Uruguay’s] history,” Xavier said. She was referring to the first government in an independent Uruguay, headed by Fructuoso Rivera of the Colorado party, between 1830 and 1834 (NotiSur, June 5, 2015).

According to official statistics, crime fell slightly after April with the implementation the Programa de Alta Dedicación Operativa (Program of High Operative Impact, PADO), a police action financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Bonomi said that statistics show that robberies and homicides fell for the first time since the return of democracy in 1985. In Montevideo, which accounts for 81% of violent crime in the country, there were 5% fewer robberies in the first nine
months of 2016 than in the same period of 2015, when annual averages taken since 1985 marked a 10% increase. In addition, official statistics show that homicides are down 8% so far in 2016 and were solved in 61% of the cases. The government said that this data is included in the draft of the next report from IDB experts. In an article published Oct. 14, the opposition daily El Observador said the multilateral agency “will cite the example of Uruguay and the PADO as an example for the region.”

In April, President Vázquez had issued a surprising invitation to all political parties— the traditional ones and their divisions and the radical Asamblea Popular—to sit down to a table to discuss issues of insecurity. Political scientists said that to stay away from the meeting would be a self-inflicted political condemnation. Everyone went. Participants met weekly with the president until October. But halfway through the process, in July, Lacalle suggested ending the dialogue. He withdrew from the discussion but failed to inspire other Blanco party members to follow his example.

The senator said he made the decision “convinced that the government is playing with our time and will not move ahead on projects we have developed.”

Facts proved him wrong, as six of the eight proposals agreed upon are moving through Congress. An unidentified official source cited by La República said that Lacalle had left the dialogue upset because Bonomi had changed the name of a ceremonial hall in the police headquarters. The hall, part of the Dirección Nacional de Información (DNI), had honored Inspector Víctor Castiglioni, who was prosecuted for crimes of torture, assassination and disappearing persons. The minister replaced Castiglioni’s name with that of the first DNI director under democracy, Julio Guarteche Terrín, who died in June.

Beyond the fact that the Frente Amplio, the union federation PIT-CNT (Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores-Convención Nacional de Trabajadores), and the social-democrat Partido Independiente condemned actions by Bordaberry and Lacalle to destabilize the country, what is certain is that both Bordaberry and Lacalle managed to meet a good many of their objectives. Above all, they managed to advance the “electoral fever,” and three years before elections set for October/November 2019, they will name candidates to replace Tabaré Vázquez, the constitutional president (NotiSur, March 4, 2005). This launches the exhausting and expensive game of polling and publicity to name the six potential candidates (NotiSur, Dec. 13, 2013).

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