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## Dark Days for Uruguay's Once-Dominant Partido Colorado

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The steady loss of its principal figures—either to death, retirement, or defection—has left Uruguay's historic Partido Colorado (Colorado Party) leaderless, without representation in the legislature, ideologically blurred, and in a crisis that could prove to be terminal, some analysts warn.

Over the course of 2016, national senators and deputies, as well as a number of departmental leaders, left the party en masse to join the recently created Partido de la Gente (Party of the People). And October saw the death of Jorge Batlle Ibáñez, the last Colorado figure to serve as president (2000-2005) and an important ideologue for the conservative party.

More recently, on April 19, the Partido Colorado's leading figure, Sen. Pedro Bordaberry, made the surprising announcement that he would retire from politics. Without offering explanations, he flew to Europe for a strictly private trip. From there, he said he would finish up his term in the legislature but not run for any elected position in 2019. Bordaberry also said he was giving up his leadership position in the party. Just 36 days later, the man who replaced Bordaberry as party head, Sen. Germán Cardoso, made a similar announcement, leaving the historic party leaderless and at a complicated crossroads.

Within the context of Uruguayan and even Latin American politics, this is no minor development. The Partido Colorado, formed in 1836 together with the Partido Nacional (National Party), set up what proved to be the region's most solid democracy. Since then, the democracy has been interrupted just twice by "dictablandas"—soft dictatorships, in which basic civil liberties are maintained—and once by an actual dictatorship (1973-1985). The Colorados governed uninterrupted until 1958. In the early part of the 20th century, the party laid the foundations of a modern, laic state with advanced social and labor laws that set Uruguay apart on a continental and global level.

The Partido Colorado's election numbers since the return to democracy seem to bear out what political scientists describe as a "process of extinction." In 1984, when the dictators were forced to hold elections before handing over power, the party came out on top with slightly more than 41% of the vote. But in 2004, after a number of ups and downs, the Colorados won just 10%.

With the rise of Bordaberry as a major political figure, the Colorados fared better in the 2009 elections, winning 17% of the vote, but slipped again in 2014, with just 12% of the vote. A pair of April polls—one taken before Bordaberry's announcement, the other just after—estimated support for the party at 6% and 3.5% respectively.

### *Roots of the problem*

Looking at the party's situation, analysts offer multiple and sometimes contradictory explanations. Most agree, however, that the problems began even before the dictatorship, after the Colorados lost control of the government for the first time to the Partido Nacional, also known as the Partido Blanco (White Party). During that time, in the 1960s, the Colorados abandoned their roots by shifting to the right, argue experts like historian Carlos Demasi. The process—led by the last two Colorado

presidents, the late Batlle Ibáñez and Julio María Sanguinetti (1985-1990 and 1995-2000)—blurred the ideological lines that had previously set the Colorados and the Blancos apart.

“The agony of the Partido Colorado began in the 1960s, when Batlle Ibáñez oriented his sector toward a neo-liberal, right-wing discourse focused on limiting the role of the state. It was a major departure from the batllista tradition,” Demasi said in an interview with the Uruguayan weekly Brecha.

The term batllista refers to a political ideology that had long been at the core of Partido Colorado thinking and dates back to early 1900s, when Batlle Ibáñez’s grandfather, José Batlle y Ordóñez, twice led the country (1903-1907 and 1911-1915). Batlle y Ordóñez is considered the true founder of Uruguay’s modern, laic, and statist system.

Demasi explained that the break with party tradition was reinforced when Batlle Ibáñez, out of a misguided sense of party loyalty, supported the government of Jorge Pacheco Areco (1967-1972)—the leader who laid the groundwork for the bloody dictatorship—even at its most repressive moments, when death squads operated and political and labor rights were being violated. As a result, the historian went on to say, the batllismo wing became a minority within the party, and even though the Colorados recovered in 1984, they weren’t able to hold their electoral base in the years that followed.

“Now the situation is complicated and more dangerous than at any moment in the past,” Demasi said. “Back then, unlike now, there weren’t parties scrambling to siphon off the voter base. The [Partido Colorado] needs to move quickly, therefore, and decide who its leaders will be.”

Demasi agrees with the bulk of political scientists that Pacheco Areco and Batlle Ibáñez brought the Partido Colorado and the military closer together. “It’s a historic alliance,” he pointed out. “The Army was derived from the government troops that fought against the Blancos, which were led at the time by President Fructuoso Rivera (1830-1834, 1839-1843), [a general] who favored efficiency, small government, and generous concessions for the agro-export sector.”

Demasi added, “The military’s top brass has long seen the Partido Colorado as a space to build leadership with quick results. The generals don’t often work their way up. They start at the top.” The latter statement was a clear reference to a pair of generals, José Bonilla and Pedro Aguerre, who top the list of likely 2019 presidential candidates for the Partido Colorado. Both are former commanders in chief under the progressive governments of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) coalition.

### *Disappointing departure*

On May 25, when Germán Cardoso followed Bordaberry’s example and opted out of his role as party leader, he presented his colleagues with a letter that, according to sources, surprised everyone for how poorly written it was. “It embarrassed our elders, the brilliant cult figures like Sanguinetti,” a member of the party’s executive committee told the pro-Blanco daily El País. Others said the letter spoke to how politically lacking Bordaberry’s heirs are.

The missive’s final paragraph drew particular attention. Cardoso might have finished by talking about the party’s rich history, the fact that it led the country for such a long period of time, or the deep mark it left on politics in Uruguay in particular and in Latin America as a whole. Instead, he wrote: “I leave with the satisfaction of having accomplished one of the party’s biggest goals in recent

years: rebuilding and re-inaugurating the old party convention hall, which we named in honor of Jorge Batlle Ibáñez.”

In the wake of the Colorado debacle, analysts are trying to gauge which party stands to benefit most from the crisis; which will attract the bulk of the Partido Colorado’s voters. Those voters may not be as numerous as they once were, but they can still make a difference in such a small country—there are only about 2.5 million eligible voters in Uruguay—whose recent elections have been decided in narrow runoffs. The obvious answer seems to be the Partido de la Gente, which Colorados and Blancos—in a long-shot bid to unseat the FA in Montevideo—formed for the 2015 municipal elections under the name Partido de la Concertación ([NotiSur, March 6, 2015](#), and [June 5, 2015](#)).

The morning paper La Diaria summed up the situation nicely. “For the Partido Blanco, the debacle of its historic adversary doesn’t offer any encouraging prospects,” the newspaper argued on May 27. “What the Blancos need isn’t support in the first round from a few former Colorado voters. Rather, they need the opposition to take votes away from the governing coalition. In that respect, the fact that other [opposition] groups are struggling doesn’t help at all, for one thing, because the stronger the Partido Blanco is vis-à-vis the other opposition parties, the more polarized things become between it and the Frente Amplio, which has clearly benefited [from that polarization] in last few elections.”

At the same time, the FA should be careful not to rest on its laurels, the Montevideo daily argued. “First, because competing against an opposition dominated by conservative positions won’t help [the FA] reactivate itself as a source of progressive policies and political action. Without other groups challenging it on the left, things will be easier in some ways, but not as healthy, [as the FA risks] settling into a lesser-of-two evils role.”

Increasingly influential sectors within the governing coalition agree, and are clamoring for change within the FA.

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