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Uruguay's Vice President Resigns and Is Replaced by Former First Lady

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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It took four years, but Uruguay's conservative opposition finally managed to rattle the government of President Tabaré Vázquez and force the resignation of Vice President Raúl Fernando Sendic, a leading next-generation figure who was expected to represent the governing Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) coalition in the October 2019 general elections.

All the right needed, it turned out, was a steady flow of misinformation—disseminated by anonymous authors operating in cyberspace and amplified by the country's major news outlets—and the unexpected “complicity” of the governing coalition itself, which to preserve the country's institutional integrity and protect its reputation for ethics and honesty in politics, didn't hesitate to condemn one of its best-positioned figures to the political gallows.

President Vázquez described the misinformation campaign as “bullying” and “the most shocking cruelty I've seen in my life.” Deputy Carlos Coitiño, leader of one of the FA's smaller member parties, reserved his criticism for the coalition's handling of the situation, saying that “many colleagues, in their eagerness to distance themselves from Sendic, don't seem to realize that it wasn't the vice president the right kept attacking, but the governing coalition as a whole.” The conservative opposition, he said, is using a “dirty campaign” to accomplish what they've been unable to do at the polls since 2004. “Although they don't want to see it, Uruguay itself is one of the targets of the neo-liberal restoration campaign underway throughout the region,” Coitiño added.

Smooth transition

The final phase of this crusade played out in just 96 hours and not in the way the conservative Partido Blanco (White Party)—eager to take political advantage of the situation—had hoped. The Blancos, also known as the Partido Nacional (National Party), are the leading right-wing force in Uruguay. The other major conservative group is the Partido Colorado (Red Party) ([NotiSur, June 23, 2017](#)).

Sendic resigned before midday on Sept. 9, a Saturday. That same day, just hours after the news went public, the Partido Blanco's leading figure, Sen. Luis Lacalle Pou, gathered reporters together in the solemnity of the deserted congressional building—which was empty only because it was a normal day off—and defined the unfolding events as a “serious political and institutional crisis.” Other party leaders, however, weren't warned or informed about Lacalle Pou's dramatic assessment. Fellow senator and Blanco bigwig Jorge Larrañaga, for example, was riding horses in the countryside at the time and didn't learn about the “serious political and institutional crisis” until later that night when he returned home. Lacalle Pou's crisis talk didn't catch on, in other words, and he was forced afterward to keep quiet.

In reality, Sendic's gesture didn't imply any institutional drama whatsoever. Instead it came as a relief to the FA, which has difficulty managing complex internal matters. The timeline of the developments, furthermore, illustrates how quickly the governing coalition moved to resolve the

problem. Sendic announced his irreversible resignation in a meeting Sept. 9 with the full FA. The following Monday, Sept. 11, he made the announcement official in a note sent to the Senate, over which, as vice president, he presided. And on Sept. 13, in a session that barely lasted a minute, the fully assembled Congress accepted his resignation and named, as his replacement, the top vote-getting senator from the 2014 elections: Lucía Topolansky.

The new vice president is a former guerrilla and the wife of ex-President José Mujica (2010-2015). She is also the first woman in Uruguayan history to hold the government's number two position. The process was so smooth that the very next day, Sept. 14, Topolansky was sworn in as the temporary replacement for President Vázquez, who departed for New York City to participate in a UN General Assembly gathering.

'Small-town mentality'

As Interior Minister Eduardo Bonomi later argued, the institutional crisis only existed in the wishful thinking of "a political leader who lost his compass in the midst of an emergency." And yet, the situation did complicate matters for the FA, which has controlled the presidency continuously since Vázquez first won election in 2004 ([NotiSur, Nov. 12, 2004](#)). Vázquez was succeeded by Mujica before returning to office in 2015 ([NotiSur, Dec. 11, 2009](#), and [Dec. 18, 2015](#)).

Particularly problematic for the coalition, which has staked its reputation on its ethical handling of power, are the various accusations that surfaced. That being said, most of the allegations against Sendic were nothing more than a series of lies that reflect more poorly on the people who posted them on Twitter than on the intended target. The campaign that led to Sendic's resignation—one that in a less democratically stable country might have had dire consequences—was fueled by baseless rumors. The vice president was accused, for example, of being homosexual, as if that were a crime. It was also said he hit someone while drunk driving, and that he and his family were thrown out of a restaurant with shouts of, "We don't serve thieves."

What really caused Sendic trouble came later, and was due not so much to his detractors as to his FA colleagues, who acted in haste before verifying the accuracy of social media allegations. At issue were the seven years Sendic served as president of the state oil company ANCAP (Administración Nacional de Combustibles, Alcohol y Portland). As a columnist for the daily *La República* explained, there are two elements involved: Possible management mistakes by Sendic that resulted in losses for the company but aren't criminal in nature, and the possibly illegal use by Sendic of corporate credit cards for personal expenses.

Sendic addressed the accusations himself by asking that he be investigated by the FA's Tribunal de Conducta Política (TCP), a political conduct tribunal. The TCP discovered, as a result, that Sendic had used company money to buy a US\$26 swimming suit (as a gift for a foreign technician who was visiting the country and wanted to visit eastern Uruguay's famous beaches) and a US\$233 mattress (so that he would have a place to rest during long workdays).

From a legal standpoint, the crime is in the action, not the amount involved. Still, said Sen. Leonardo de León, "it's ridiculous to accuse him of this when we all know that as president of the oil company, Sendic dealt on a daily basis with operations involving millions of dollars." Mujica, the former president, commented on the case as well. "We're such small potatoes. Look at what a small-town

mentality we have," he quipped. "In Brazil, they talk about how Geddel Vieira Lima, [a former Cabinet official] under [President] Michel Temer, had suitcases in his possession containing US\$16 million. And here we are worried about a mattress and a bathing suit."

Crisis management

In his resignation speech before the full FA, Sendic said that had been "suffering for years from major harassment." Two days later, President Vázquez, spoke to reporters about the values of Uruguayan democracy and strongly acknowledged the work of his now former vice president.

"The political situation generated by the resignation owes much to the country's strong institutional framework, a legacy we must all make an effort to protect," he said. "Sendic performed capably, seriously, and responsibly the role he was assigned by the people ... He did so with honesty, ability, and a commitment to the people and to the government's agenda." Vázquez described Sendic's resignation, furthermore, as an act of "enormous courage" and "a yet another demonstration of the commitment the FA has to the principles of ethics and respect, values that brought our political force together."

Ricardo Peirano, a columnist with the conservative Catholic-affiliated daily El Observador, criticized the president for trying to wrap up the crisis the way a parent might finish the last bedtime story: "And then they lived happily ever after." Either way, the president is widely acknowledged—by friends and foes alike—as a charismatic leader with a real talent for navigating and resolving crises. In this case, he managed not only to rein in a complicated situation but also to quiet Lacalle Pou and others who sought to benefit politically.

For that he received some unsolicited help from the top leadership of the Partido Colorado. The same day that the Lacalle Pou gathered reporters to talk about "the serious political and institutional crisis" facing the country, the executive committee of the Colorados insisted in a statement that "the resignation of a vice president doesn't need to cause, nor causes in this case, any kind of institutional crisis, because Sendic will be replaced in a peaceful and orderly fashion by the appropriate person in accordance with the Constitution."

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