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Uruguayans Vote To Maintain Amnesty Law For Soldiers Accused Of Human Rights Abuses

by John Neagle

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On April 17, Uruguayan President Julio Maria Sanguinetti said the question of amnesty for human rights abuses under military rule has been settled by voter approval of the amnesty law passed by his government in 1986. With 7,037 of 7,072 districts reporting in the April 16 referendum, the vote was 1,013,554 (52.62%) for maintaining the amnesty law, and 771,942 (40.08%) in favor of the law's revocation. Blank or invalid ballots, and others defined as questionable that may or may not be counted, totaled 140,703, or 7.3% of the votes cast. About 85% of eligible voters participated. When reporters asked whether the government would consider a compromise with opponents of amnesty, Sanguinetti replied: "They were the ones who chose this way. They were the ones who submitted the law to a majority vote... National peace is to accept the verdict of the ballot box." Sanguinetti told reporters the amnesty does not excuse or justify military abuses. It must be remembered, he said, that military intervention followed years of terrorism and economic chaos. The president said that leftist Tupamaro guerrillas were released from prison in 1985 and the military amnesty "is on the same line." Since 1986, the Tupamaros have become a legal political party. During the 1973-85 period of military rule, about 150 Uruguayans were executed, 200 more were arrested and disappeared, and several thousand were tortured. The amnesty law prohibits prosecution of about 180 soldiers and police accused of torture, murder and other crimes during the military regime. The law was passed by the parliament in December 1986, after officers made clear they would not answer charges in the courts. Sanguinetti's Colorado party and the Blancos, or National Party, supported the amnesty. A coalition of leftist parties, the Broad Front, opposed the amnesty in the parliament vote. Uruguayans voted on the amnesty law after the National Commission for a Referendum gathered 634,000 petition signatures during 1987 and 1988, more than the required 25% of registered voters. According to AP, the Commission, and the human rights and leftist political groups that supported the referendum, have apparently accepted referendum results. (Basic data from AP, 04/17/89; Notimex, 04/16/89, 04/17/89; New York Times, 04/16/89)

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