Uruguayan election: Frente Amplio wins plurality in first round

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Uruguay is headed for a second round of presidential elections November 28 following a vote at the end of last month that delivered the largest share of the ballots to a center-left coalition known as the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) and its presidential candidate, Tabare Vazquez.

The election marked a historic shift in Uruguayan politics, where the two traditional ruling parties, the "Blancos" and "Colorados," have alternated in power since the country gained its independence from Spain in 1823. The results in the first round of voting October 31 already guarantee that the Frente Amplio will represent the largest bloc in the country's parliament, though it falls short of an absolute majority.

The country of 3.2 million people historically has had one of the highest standards of living and most extensive social welfare systems of any country in Latin America. These conditions have been sharply eroded in the latter half of the twentieth century, however. A military dictatorship which ruled the country from 1973 to 1985 massacred the most militant sections of the working class and crushed the trade unions.

In the more recent period, the outgoing government of President Julio Maria Sanguinetti has embarked on a series of "free market reforms" that have driven the official unemployment rate up to 10.5 percent and attacked social benefits upon which the broad masses of the Uruguayan people rely. The country's ongoing recession is expected to cut the Gross Domestic Product by up to 2 percent this year.

Uruguay's main trade union federation, the PIT-CNT, has lost nearly 80 percent of its membership over the course of just a few years, while recent studies have shown that fully 40 percent of the children in the capital city of Montevideo do not have access to the minimum income required to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing.

The vote represented a protest against these deteriorating conditions. In Montevideo, the center of the Uruguayan working class, the Frente Amplio won more than half of the votes, as it did in the two other provinces—Canelones and Maldonado—with the largest populations.

In the second round of balloting, Vazquez will face the Colorado Party's candidate, Jorge Batlle, who trailed him by 7 percentage points in the first vote. Batlle has won the support of the Blanco Party for the second round on the basis of an anticommunist campaign, charging that Vazquez's election would inaugurate a severe economic crisis and an investors' boycott.

Luis Alberto Lacalle, an ex-president and candidate of the Blancos, called for a coalition between the traditional rivals as "the true response against Marxism." He added, "There were sectors of the Frente Amplio that supported the armed struggle. We can see therefore that democracy requires vigilance."

The Frente Amplio, an electoral coalition joining Social Democrats, the Stalinist Communist Party and former Tupamaro guerrillas, has attempted to answer such charges by dispatching delegations to the International Monetary Fund and the Wall Street banks, assuring them that the party will not interfere with the essential profit interests of the foreign banks and multinationals.

In the wake of the Frente Amplio's success in the first round of voting, Vazquez spoke of carrying out a "cautious revolution," declaring that his government would stand for "an alternative to the neo-liberal model, which is progressivism." The front-runner added, "Our economic policy is absolutely gradualist, except on two

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themes, the fight against corruption and against poverty." He vowed that the Frente Amplio would introduce neither "adventures nor magic."

Aside from promises to raise the minimum wage and reduce the value-added tax, the Frente Amplio's proposals amount to vague talk of discouraging "short-term" investment in favor of channeling capital into productive enterprises. Vazquez has denied any intention to tax bank holdings or change the bank secrecy laws that have made Montevideo a regional financial center. Just under half of the $11 billion in Uruguayan deposits belong to foreigners.

Meanwhile, the country's military lost little time in expressing its own attitude toward the election. Chief of the army, General Fernan Amado, declared that the issue of massive human rights violations under the former military dictatorship had been “ruled upon and closed.”

The statement came in response to a declaration by Vazquez that if he were elected his government would open up a new investigation into what happened to the thousands who “disappeared” after being detained under military rule. He described the fate of the disappeared as “an open wound on our society.”

As in other Latin American countries where the military ceded power to civilian governments, Uruguay instituted a blanket amnesty, preventing the prosecution of the officers and soldiers who carried out executions, torture and illegal abductions and imprisonment under the dictatorship.

The subject of the disappeared was highlighted recently by a public appeal from the Argentine poet, Juan Gelman, for the government to assist him in determining the fate of his daughter-in-law, who was abducted by the Argentine military regime and transported to Uruguay under “Operation Condor,” a joint program of repression established by the dictatorships throughout Latin America's Southern Cone. He also asked for information about a granddaughter who was born in captivity.

Uruguay's lame duck president Sanguinetti sent a letter to the poet November 5, complaining bitterly that “after 24 years of asking nothing of the Uruguayan authorities, you have given me 129 days to try and help you.” He went on to claim that there was no evidence the young woman was ever brought to Uruguay and no information had been found regarding her fate.

Naming high-ranking officers who were directly involved in Operation Condor, Gelman in his reply demanded to know whether Sanguinetti had asked each of them what they had done with his daughter-in-law.

Gelman's demand has received support from intellectuals, writers and artists from all over the world. His ordeal began in August 1976, when agents of the Argentine dictatorship raided his home. Not finding him, they seized his children. His daughter Nora was freed after being tortured in a clandestine prison. His son Marcelo was never seen again. His son's wife, Maria Claudia, eight months pregnant, also disappeared. She was last traced to Uruguay, where she bore a daughter, whose whereabouts are likewise unknown.

Uruguay's vote follows the recent defeat of the Peronist party in Argentina, after 10 years in which the Menem government has carried out policies dictated by the IMF, while pegging the country's currency directly to the dollar. As in Uruguay, these policies have meant a sharp increase in unemployment and poverty. Also as in Uruguay, the victors in the Argentine election have advanced a vague program promising "social justice," while pledging to continue the basic economic policies demanded by the international banking institutions.

In both countries, center-left coalitions have been the beneficiaries of mounting popular anger over deteriorating social conditions, while offering no real program for overturning the policies imposed by the international financial institutions and multinational corporations and their domestic agents.

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