

Frente Amplio wins elections in Uruguay

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Montevideo—In elections held on Sunday, October 31, the center-left Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition came to power for the first time in Uruguay, with Socialist Party physician Tabaré Vázquez taking almost 52 percent of the popular vote for president, thereby avoiding a runoff.

Vázquez addressed a crowd of thousands from the balcony of the Hotel Presidente in the downtown capital Montevideo at just past 9 pm, urging, “Celebrate, Uruguayans, celebrate. Victory is yours.” The celebrations had already begun, however, with throngs of people heading to the polls earlier than usual and taking part in processions of cars, bicycles and pedestrians draped in flags surging through Montevideo’s downtown and coastal areas, and particularly in working class neighborhoods across the city. As exit poll results became known, spontaneous street celebrations took hold of the capital and in several cities of the interior.

Days before, on October 27th, a sea of hundreds of thousands of Uruguayans waving the red, blue, and white flags of the Frente Amplio (FA) massed in downtown Montevideo for the coalition’s official closing act before Sunday’s elections. Organizers and some media accounts estimated the numbers at the rally at half a million people, making it perhaps the largest political demonstration in the history of this small South American country of 3.4 million citizens. Cities of the interior such as Canelones, Melo and Maldonado also witnessed their largest political demonstrations ever in support of the FA in the run-up to the elections.

Up to 60,000 economic émigrés and former political exiles from the dictatorship years of 1973-85 had arrived by plane, bus and ferry from places such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Europe, the United States and Australia to take part in elections that do not allow for absentee or consular voting.

The vote represented an overwhelming popular repudiation of the free-market policies of the incumbent Colorado administration of outgoing President Jorge Batlle. The Colorados won a historically low vote total of 10 percent, the worst election results ever for the “party of the government” that has ruled Uruguay for most of its history as a republic. Guillermo Stirling, former Interior Minister in the Batlle administration, was nominated as the Colorado presidential candidate and sacrificial goat to head the party’s guaranteed historic failure.

Batlle represented one of the Bush administration’s most servile supporters in Latin America, currying favor with Washington by supporting the war on Iraq—despite polls showing 90 percent of the population opposed to it—and sending peacekeeping troops to Haiti and backing the US bid to isolate Cuba.

The new government will include a number of politicians who faced imprisonment, torture and exile under the former military-controlled regime. The electoral coalition was initially formed by the Socialist and Communist parties in 1971, but was joined in 1989 by ex-members of the urban guerrilla movement, the Tupamaros, as well as the Christian Democratic Party and other bourgeois political forces.

Five years of a deep recession and decades of economic restructuring have left in ruins what was once a relatively developed welfare state known as the “Switzerland of South America.” After the country bottomed out with the socio-economic depression of 2002, the Frente Amplio won the support of broad layers of the population with the

promise of working for a renewed and “different” Uruguay.

There are definite limits, however, on how “different” the country can become under the leadership of a heterogeneous coalition that includes bourgeois parties, such as the Christian Democrats, and which is committed to fulfilling Uruguay’s obligations to make payments on a foreign debt of \$12 billion.

Victory for the Frente Amplio represents an historic break with 174 years of alternating rule between the country’s two major capitalist parties, the Colorados and the Blancos. The FA had controlled the Montevideo municipality since 1989. Their victory Sunday extended the party’s control across the entire country, bringing it into office for the first time in at least eight, and possibly up to ten of Uruguay’s 19 Departments.

At stake in these elections were the presidency as well as senate and legislative seats in a parliamentary system of proportional representation. An electoral “reform” that was passed in 1996 in order to stave off a victory by the Frente Amplio requires that parties obtain “50 percent plus one” of the popular vote to win in the first round, or else the top two parties compete in a run-off election one month later.

Prior to the run-off system, simple majorities were enough to claim the presidency. Blanco President Luis Alberto Lacalle had won the 1989 elections with only 38 percent of votes cast, and the two-time Colorado President Julio María Sanguinetti won the 1994 elections with roughly 35 percent of the vote, with only three or four percentages separating first from third place. In 1999, the Frente Amplio won the plurality with 40 percent of the vote, but subsequently lost in the run-off to the Colorado Batlle.

The FA will control 17 of 30 senate seats and 53 of 99 legislative seats in the Lower Chamber of parliament.

The majority faction within the coalition, with nearly 30 percent of its internal vote, has become the Movimiento de Participación Popular (MPP), led by the former Tupamaro, José Mujica, and consisting of an eclectic group of followers. It displaces the previous majority of Vázquez’s Socialist Party. The second largest internal party vote, at nearly 18 percent, was that of Danilo Astori’s Asamblea Uruguay, a conservative social democratic faction. They were closely followed by the Socialists at 15 percent. The Stalinist Communist Party, which historically has dominated the Uruguayan union movement, gained just 6 percent of the internal vote, while a collection of so-called “radical” parties—Guevarists and the Posadist POR among others—polled less than 5 percent.

Though the Nationalist Blanco Party did not make it to the runoff, they nevertheless polled 50 percent more than in the previous elections and will thus be awarded more senate and legislative seats, reaching 11 senators and 35 representatives. The party won at least nine, and up to eleven, Departments of the Interior. The Blanco candidate was Jorge Larrañaga, a populist demagogue who has managed to revive somewhat the fortunes of the Blancos after a weak third place finish in 1999.

The Frente Amplio’s victory at the polls was prefigured by a December 2003 vote on a referendum to overturn the privatization of the state petroleum company Ancap. The result was a landslide decision to oppose

privatization, which had been supported by both the Blancos and Colorados

A similar plebiscite on the 2004 ballot proposed a constitutional reform to protect the state water company OSE from privatization and to declare water resources of vital national interest. The “yes” vote was approved by up to 60 percent of the electorate, and represents the first case in the world of a voted constitutional reform of this nature to protect water or other natural resources.

Throughout Latin America, governments following the so-called “Washington consensus” economic model of privatizing state industries and services, fiscal austerity and debt servicing have left in their wake devastating levels of poverty and inequality. Over the past several years, these governments have faced a string of defeats at the polls at the hands of opposition parties espousing a vague nationalist populism and limited programs to alleviate social misery.

The rise of Workers Party President Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and to a lesser extent Ricardo Lagos in Chile are examples of this regional trend.

In Uruguay, the 2002 crisis came on the heels of the Brazilian devaluation and the Argentine depression. In 2002, unemployment levels reached historic highs of 23 percent, real wages plummeted and the peso was severely devalued. Since 1999, poverty grew by 108 percent, engulfing almost 40 percent of the population in 2004, including over half of all urban children.

Emigration approached the historic levels of the dictatorship years, with 30,000 leaving per year between 1999 and 2003. Many of these economic exiles are young and educated, representing an important loss of intellectual capital for the country.

Shantytowns in the western and northern sections of Montevideo and in cities of the interior have grown 10 percent annually during this period. Previously unheard of cases of human misery have unfolded in recent years as well, including infant and child mortality from malnourishment and starvation.

Once “eradicated” infectious diseases such as tuberculosis reemerged, and environmental contamination and diseases spread to many parts of the country, including a lead poisoning pandemic that has affected most of the population. These trends are only partially captured by Uruguay’s slipping of six places on the United Nations’ Human Development Index between 2003 and 2004, though the fall began much earlier, as the country dropped fourteen places since 1995.

The Frente Amplio has rejected any radical economic or social changes to confront this growing human catastrophe. During the recent campaign, Vázquez preached moderation and made overtures to the international financial institutions as well as the national bourgeoisie, offering guarantees to not “rock the boat” upon gaining power.

At its membership conference last December, the FA rejected proposals to raise the minimum wage, which today covers barely 10 percent of the living costs of the average family. It also vowed to continue payments on the country’s foreign debt—amounting to 35 percent of Uruguay’s export earnings—and even to maintain the amnesty imposed by previous governments for the torturers and killers of the former dictatorship.

Vázquez used a trip to Washington to name the economist and senator Danilo Astori as his future Economy Minister. The appointment was seen as a guarantee to the international financial institutions and investors of the FA’s commitment to the continuity of the country’s essential economic policies. Reuters news agency described Astori as “well regarded on Wall Street.” In one recent interview, the future minister declared, “In today’s world, to break with the IMF and repudiate the [foreign] debt would mean self-isolation and going toward some sort of Africanization.”

Astori has also voiced support for establishing joint ventures between Uruguayan state enterprises and foreign capital and for eliminating job

security for state-sector workers, who account for the majority of the unionized work force in Uruguay.

Any illusions that the FA’s political program will spell a return to the early twentieth century Uruguayan model of state welfarism will be quickly dispelled by the incoming government’s economic policies.

Both Vázquez and Astori have declared the Workers Party government of Brazil to be a model for the kind of policies they propose to implement in Uruguay.

Under “Lula,” the Workers Party government has implemented austerity programs in the interests of the international banks, in some cases going even further than his predecessor, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, whose IMF-dictated policies he had criticized during the 2002 Brazilian elections.

The FA has promised to implement an “emergency plan” as one of its first acts, and initiate social and jobs programs to alleviate the devastating poverty and unemployment in Uruguay. Similar pledges made by the Workers Party government in Brazil to create a “zero hunger” program and create a million new jobs have yielded scant results under conditions in which the government’s economic policies are subordinated to the demands of international investors.

The incoming Vázquez government will confront almost immediate demands to meet more than \$1.7 billion in debt payments, virtually precluding any major social initiatives.

The FA coalition has pledged a strengthening of regional ties through the Mercosur trade bloc with Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. The Kirchner and Lula administrations, as well as Chávez in Venezuela, had done little to hide their preference for a Vázquez presidency in the run-up to the elections, and were among the first to congratulate the president-elect.

The “carnal relations” of Uruguay with the United States, to borrow a term from Argentina’s neoliberal ex-president Carlos Menem, will most likely be curtailed. Vázquez has pledged to reestablish diplomatic ties with Cuba, favors an independent and strengthened Mercosur, and opposes the FTAA and the Iraq war, though it remains unclear whether he will rescind the peacekeeping missions.



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