

Broad Front reassures US and local elite

# Uruguay: victorious left turns sharply to the right

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The unprecedented victory of the Broad Front coalition over a two-party system that has ruled Uruguay for over a century touched off mass celebrations throughout the country last October.

Over the past month, however, the incoming administration—which includes the Socialist and Communist Parties as well as the Movement for Popular Participation, led by ex-Tupamaro guerrillas—has given unmistakable signals that it intends to pursue policies that are in fundamental continuity with those of the right-wing government that it is replacing.

The most startling indication along these lines came in the midst of the holiday week between Christmas and New Year's, following a meeting between President-elect Tabaré Vazquez and outgoing President Jorge Batlle of the Colorado Party.

The Montevideo daily *El País* reported December 29 that Vazquez had offered Batlle the post of Uruguayan ambassador to Washington.

For many, the news was unbelievable. Batlle was without question one of the most unpopular presidents in all of Latin America. In the election last October, his ruling Colorado Party placed a distant third, with barely 10 percent of the vote.

For workers who voted against him, the prospect that Batlle would hold any post whatsoever in the new administration was seen as a bad joke. "He should get a position in the circus, either as the guy they fire out of the cannon or as a clown, something he knows," was a typical reaction.

Hatred for the president, who came to office in 1999, stems in large part from his handling of the national economy, which plunged into deep recession in 2002, leaving at least 17 percent of the economically active population unemployed and close to a third of the country below the poverty line. He has also been implicated in a major banking scandal that contributed to the financial disaster. He has faithfully followed International Monetary Fund policies for meeting payments on a crushing \$13.4 billion debt that equals slightly more than the country's entire annual gross internal product.

Batlle was, moreover, among Latin America's most subservient leaders in relation to Washington. He acted as the Bush administration's attack dog against Cuba in regional

forums, solidarized himself with the US invasion of Iraq and condemned the United Nations for failing to back Washington's policy of preventive war.

To send such an individual as Uruguay's envoy to Washington would be tantamount to placing the conduct of the country's foreign affairs in the hands of the Bush White House. With his links to the Uruguayan military and sectors close to the former dictatorship—the minister of tourism in the Colorado government is the son of former dictator Juan María Bordaberry—Batlle's posting to Washington would effectively turn the Uruguayan embassy there into the headquarters for any future military coup.

The news report on the Vazquez-Batlle meeting left the Frente Amplio in complete disarray. Apparently reacting to the outrage within the ranks of his supporters, Vazquez initially told the media that he had offered Batlle the ambassadorship only as a "joke." His chief aide denied that the subject even came up.

This version of the conversation, however, was immediately contradicted by Vazquez's running mate, Vice President-elect Rodolfo Nin Novoa, who confirmed the offer and praised the incoming president for his "pragmatism." Batlle himself said he was offered the post, but declined.

Finally, asked by a reporter for the weekly magazine *Busqueda* what he would have done had Batlle accepted the offer, however it was intended, Vazquez declared, "I think that beyond the circumstances of how it came up, because of his knowledge of the United States, his friendship with the US president and his knowledge of the government of the United States, Doctor Batlle could offer the country an important service."

The bizarre episode was only one of a number of statements and actions taken by the Frente Amplio that are apparently aimed at placating both US imperialism and the native ruling elite.

Earlier in December, the leftist coalition's national legislators joined overwhelmingly in a vote to increase the size of the Uruguayan army contingent that is part of the so-called peacekeeping force in Haiti. Only a handful of Frente Amplio

deputies in the lower house voted against the measure.

A former Tupamaro guerrilla, now an Uruguayan senator, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, defended the vote in words that resembled nothing so much as a US Republican advocating funds for the intervention in Iraq, “Our people and our contingents are there on the front and perhaps in very difficult conditions, and we cannot deny them what they ask.” The “people” and “contingents,” in this case represent the same military that liquidated so many of Fernández Huidobro’s former comrades three decades ago.

One of those who voted against the increase, Socialist Party Deputy José Chiflet, defended his position in a manner that served to indict the Frente Amplio leadership. The Uruguayan contingent, he said, “will only contribute to consolidating a regime that usurped power, with the classic landing of marines, the overthrow of an elected president and the imposition of an illegitimate government...giving support to a coup perpetrated by foreign intervention in violation of the right to self determination of a sister country.”

It was reported that the Frente Amplio voted for the increase in troops in response to explicit threats from the US embassy that failure to do so would result in economic sanctions from Washington.

Meanwhile, the incoming minister of economy, Danilo Astori, has reassured the foreign banks and the IMF that the Frente Amplio will continue to implement the structural adjustment policies of its predecessors.

Astori also met with the Rural Association of Uruguay, representing the country’s powerful landowners, and guaranteed them “free market” policies. The meeting was held to dispel any fears that the new government would adopt policies proposed by sections of the Frente Amplio with the aim of fostering the growth of national agricultural-related industries. The proposals included restrictions on the export of cattle on the hoof and unprocessed wool and hides.

In a similar signal to the multinationals and Uruguayan capitalists, Vazquez named as his minister of industry Jorge Lepa, the former regional director of Texaco and an ex-president of the US-Uruguayan Chamber of Commerce. The selection of the oil conglomerate executive provoked murmurs of protests from union leaders, who saw it as a threat to continue the privatization of state enterprises

Though it was widely hoped in Uruguay that the Frente Amplio’s victory could at last bring to account those who were responsible for mass repression in the 1970s and 1980s, this too seems unlikely. In a pre-election conference last year, the Frente Amplio voted to support the continuation of an amnesty that exempts military personnel from prosecution for the executions, disappearances, torture and political imprisonment of tens of thousands of Uruguayans that took place during the dozen years after the dictatorship came to power in 1973.

Only one person—former foreign minister Juan Carlos Blanco—has ever been tried for any of these crimes. He was

convicted in 2002 in connection with the disappearance and murder of a politically active teacher, Elena Quinteros, who was seized by the military from the Venezuelan embassy. He was released after only six months in jail and subsequently appointed by the Batlle government to an arbitration panel of the Mercosur common market.

Former dictator Juan María Bordaberry was charged earlier than this with violating the constitution in connection with his actions in 1973, when he dissolved parliament, turning effective power over to the military. In the midst of the political transition talks last month, a Supreme Court justice quietly dismissed the charge, claiming that to proceed would amount to trying the former coup leader twice for the same crime. In fact, the 1986 precedent cited by the judge was a Supreme Court decision—based upon a legal technicality—not to hear charges relating to the coup. The matter never went to trial.

The new case, moreover, includes charges that were never made in 1986, including responsibility for torture, assassination and collaboration by the Uruguayan secret police in Operation Condor, the joint operation by Latin American dictatorships to track down and murder political opponents in exile.

The new charges against Bordaberry were brought by an association representing the relatives of people murdered by the dictatorship. The country’s main trade union federation, the PIT-CNT supported the case. Earlier, Bordaberry managed to foil a prosecution for his role in ordering the 1972 massacre of eight left-wing trade unionists.

Though another attempt to bring the case to court is expected, time is running out. On March 1, the same day that Vazquez assumes the Uruguayan presidency, the ex-dictator lawyers can invoke a statute of limitations to avoid prosecution. The date marks the 20th anniversary of the end of military rule. If Bordaberry succeeds in waiting out the statute, human rights groups have vowed to charge him with crimes against humanity, which, under international law, have no time limitations.



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