Corporate media casts ex-Uruguayan president and former guerrilla José Mujica as secular saint

Andrea Lobo
18 May 2025

Thousands turned out for José "Pepe" Mujica's funeral on May 14, filling Montevideo's streets.

The display of popular affection for Uruguay's ex-president and former Tupamaro guerrilla took place against the backdrop of a global upsurge of far-right and openly authoritarian forces, personified by Argentina's Javier Milei, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and America's Donald Trump.

The coming to power of figures like Milei and Bolsonaro who unapologetically defend the fascist military dictatorships that terrorized Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s demands a sober examination of the content of Mujica's politics, which are broadly presented as an "alternative."

President Yamandú Orsi, who lead's Mujica's Frente Amplio (Broad Front) party, said in a commemoration posted on X:

> We have to honor those who have done so much for us and for our country and that principle of coming to power to transform reality to govern for all, not for a small group, not for one half.

The elevation of left-sounding and "humble" politicians like Mujica has long been part of the political stock in trade of the capitalist ruling elites, designed to divert popular discontent into safe channels. Today, Mujica's brand of populism is being promoted widely by the corporate media internationally amid fear of brewing social anger.

The right-wing Brazilian daily *Estadão,* for instance, ran an opinion piece titled "The lesson from Mujica that Lula and Bolsonaro need to hear: public power is not for ostentation," lauding his personal austerity.

Meanwhile, Spain's *El País* praised him as "the calm revolutionary."

The "calm" that earned Mujica this praise is based on a political career that stands in opposition to the fight for genuine socialist and revolutionary politics in the working class.

Born in 1935 to a modest Montevideo family, Mujica's early life was shaped by varying levels of poverty along with the influence of mass bourgeois nationalist movements like Peronism along with Stalinism and Social Democracy that dominated Latin American left politics. As early as 1956, Mujica became politically active through legislator Enrique Erro and became youth leader of the National Party, the oldest capitalist party in the country. In 1962, Erro and Mujica worked with the Socialist Party to establish a new party, the Popular Union.

In 1964, he joined the Tupamaros, the Uruguayan version of the petty-bourgeois guerrilla movements that spread across the region, inspired by the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

The Tupamaros' strategy of urban guerrillaism, consisting of bank robberies, Robin Hood-style food distributions, and kidnappings, sought to destabilize Uruguay's increasingly authoritarian state. But their actions ultimately isolated the most radicalized youth and workers from the broader proletariat.

Guerrilla strategies, glorified by Pabloite revisionists, left workers under the domination of Stalinist and reformist leaders, turning them into mere spectators to acts of "armed struggle." Ultimately, they served to politically paralyze the working class and pave the way for a military dictatorship that would subject Uruguay's population to one of the highest per capita rates of imprisonment and torture anywhere on the planet.

In Uruguay, the Workers Revolutionary Party (POR) founded in 1944 as a section of the Trotskyist Fourth International became dominated by the tendency led by Argentine revisionist Juan Posadas. In 1953, Posadas supported the Pabloite faction within the Fourth International that argued for liquidating the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist "mass" movements, in opposition to the defense of orthodox Trotskyism by the International Committee of the Fourth International that was formed based upon the "Open Letter" drafted by James P. Cannon.

The Posadists, who would break with Pabloism on an unprincipled basis, responded to the Cuban Revolution by glorifying Guevarism and promoting guerrilla warfare across the continent, similarly to other Pabloite tendencies like the Morenoite PRT-ERP in Argentina.

Throughout this time, the ICFI and its supporters waged an intransigent campaign for the political independence of the working class, against the Pabloites' adaptation to Castroism, Guevarism and alliances with bourgeois parties.

In 1971, the Tupamaro's political arm and the Uruguayan POR joined the new Frente Amplio, a popular front coalition that

included the bourgeois Christian Democrats, Stalinists and numerous left and openly conservative forces. The Frente Amplio, which ran retired Gen. Líber Seregni as its presidential candidate, lost in a rigged November 1971 election that involved the intervention by the Nixon administration, the British government and the Brazilian dictatorship.

The resulting regime led by cattle rancher Juan María Bordaberry launched a repressive military offensive against the left. In June 1973, Bordaberry dissolved Congress and installed a direct military dictatorship that he led until being himself overthrown by the military in 1976.

Mujica was first arrested in 1970 and recaptured in 1971 and 1972 following two successful escapes. He spent some 14 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement, and subjected to torture. Released in 1985 under an amnesty that also shielded his torturers, Mujica and most of the Tupamaros abandoned the armed struggle to dissolve the movement into electoral politics as part of the Frente Amplio.

This shift from the armed struggle to capitalist politics was carried out by Guevaraist guerrillas across the Americas and internationally. This confirmed the petty-bourgeois class character of these groups, which ultimately represented sections of the national bourgeoisie that sought compromise with imperialism and its allies in the ultra-reactionary layers of the oligarchy.

The history of the Frente Amplio is one of bitter defeats for the Uruguayan working class, from the rigged 1971 election that opened the door to dictatorship, to becoming the preferred instrument of class rule by sections of the ruling elite advocating for "national development" policies that failed to address the roots of social inequality.

Mujica's 2010–2015 presidency included some limited progressive policies—legalizing abortion and same-sex marriage—but these ultimately served to cover up the lack of any genuine effort to transform the social conditions of the working class. The administration's economic program, largely shaped by his vice president Danilo Astori, was based on a utopian vision of small-business capitalism and export-led growth, reliant on trade concessions from the US and Europe. This model did little to challenge land concentration, wealth inequality, or chronic unemployment, which forced half a million Uruguayans (out of a total population of barely 3.4 million) to seek work abroad.

Crucially, Mujica's government defended the 1986 amnesty law that protected military torturers and assassins, along with their bourgeois sponsors, justifying this as "reconciliation". His administration normalized labor migration as an economic safety valve, rather than addressing its structural causes. Ultimately, the Frente Amplio's "national development" project proved impotent in the face of a globalized system of production dominated by imperialism.

Many workers and youth becoming radicalized in opposition to the injustice and deepening crisis of capitalism may feel drawn to "left-sounding" figures like Mujica, who forged an image of personal humility and intellectuality to contrast with the obscene corruption, bombast and stupidity of today's political establishments. At the same time, his popularity was also carefully cultivated from above.

El País observed, "The former president of Uruguay did not have to go to social media seeking shares, likes, and views: the networks came to him." Why did these algorithms controlled by the corporate ruling elite promote Mujica, and, for that matter, why is the corporate media posthumously glorifying him as a secular saint?

This promotion can only be explained by the fact that his politics posed no threat to the profit system. Ultimately, the seemingly contradictory stages in his long career, from Tupamaro guerrilla actions to popular front electoralism in the Frente Amplio, equally represented a dead-end that served to anesthetize and disorient workers and youth.

Despite his "deep-sounding" reflections about various topics, his petty-bourgeois nationalist politics were ultimately marked by a pessimistic outlook on society recognized by Mujica himself. In an October interview with *El País*, he said:

> I dedicated myself to changing the world and didn't change a damn thing, but I was entertained and gave meaning to my life. I will die happy. I spent it dreaming, fighting, struggling. They beat me up and everything else. It doesn't matter, I have no scores to settle.

Such pessimism and resignation reflect a class indifference to the fate of the popular masses who have suffered the consequences of the historic betrayals and defeats inflicted upon the Latin American working class.

The tragic example of Chile's Salvador Allende looms large: a popular front government that, for all its "socialist" rhetoric and limited reforms, defended capitalist property relations and interests against the revolutionary upsurge of the Chilean working class and paved the way for a US-backed military coup in September 1973 and the bloodthirsty dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

As with the rest of Latin America's "pink tide," Mujica and the Frente Amplio provide a popular façade for bankrupt capitalist regimes.

As the region's ruling elites prepare to reprise the deadly fascist repression of the 1970s in response to a new resurgence of the class struggle, the working class must draw the bitter lessons of this history and build a new revolutionary leadership based upon the socialist and internationalist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International.