

CONTINUITY OR CHANGE? PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN URUGUAY IN 2009

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On November 29, 2009, José "Pepe" Mujica of the centre-left coalition Frente Amplio (FA, meaning "Broad Front") was elected president of Uruguay in the second round of elections. He will take office on March 1, 2010. The 74-year-old Mujica, former Tupamaro of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN), who spent nearly the entire period of Uruguayan military dictatorship (1973 to 1984) behind bars in sometimes inhumane conditions, will take over from Tabaré Vázquez, leader since 2005 of the first FA government in the history of the small country on the Río de la Plata. Of modest demeanour but enjoying international respect, the oncologist Vázquez, who didn't allow his office of State President to stop him from practicing, ended his tenure with approval rates soaring at more than 70 percent. The shoes to be filled by his successor Mujica are large ones. Mujica and his vice-President, former minister of the economy Danilo Astori, are both keenly aware of the responsibility that they bear for the successful continuation of the project of their coalition, whose broad political spectrum ranges from communists and former guerrilleros like the newly elected president to social and Christian democrats. Vázquez himself was barred from standing again for election by the Uruguayan constitution, which does not permit the direct re-election of incumbent presidents. Pre-election efforts to change the constitution to allow this had been ruled out categorically by Vázquez himself, in a move which served to distance him from the growing tendency of incumbents in the region to use constitutional changes to stay in power.

The loser in the election was former president Luis Alberto Lacalle, who had stood for the largest opposition party, the nationalist-conservative Partido Nacional (PN). Lacalle, now 67, was at the helm of the ship of state between 1990 and 1995 and is currently a senator and chairman of the Directorio del Partido Nacional, the party's management body.

The decision of who was to be the next president was made by the 2.5 million-strong electorate – voting is compulsory in Uruguay – during the second round of elections held on the last Sunday in November, after the first round held on October 25, 2009 had, as predicted, given no single political bloc the required absolute majority. The run-off was contested only by those candidates from the first round who had garnered the most support: Mujica (FA), Lacalle (PN) and two others. A simple majority was all that was required to propel the successful candidate into the country's highest office. The results issued by the Uruguayan electoral court declared Mujica the winner with 52.4 percent of the vote. His challenger Lacalle received 43.5 percent. The pro-

portion of empty ballot envelopes (votos en blanco) and spoilt papers amounted to 4.1 percent.

José Mujica (FA) and Luis Alberto Lacalle (PN), who emerged from the first round of elections as the firm favorites, had had their candidacies for the presidency endorsed by their respective parties with the requisite absolute majority in the pre-elections of June 28, 2009. The pre-elections introduced in a constitutional reform in 1996 are intended to ensure that each party unites around one candidate. General usage in Uruguay refers to them as "internal elections" (elecciones internas). This is not quite the case, however, because every enfranchised citizen, regardless of whether or not he is a member of the party in question, can vote for the person he would like to see as presidential candidate. The elections are conducted by secret ballot and are organized, monitored and counted by the electoral court. Unlike the actual presidential and parliamentary elections themselves, voting in the pre-elections is not compulsory. Whoever emerges victorious from the pre-election goes on to fight the national election with his or her own choice of vice-presidential candidate as what is termed the "fórmula" of the party in question.

The choices of vice-presidential candidate were, for the FA, former minister of the economy Danilo Astori and, for the PN, senator Jorge Larrañaga. Before the pre-elections, both of these had long been regarded by their respective parties as candidates for the presidency itself, but both were defeated on June 28, losing in each case by margins in excess of 10 percent.

It was in the final push of the electoral campaign after the first round that Mujica and Astori, steering a course of moderation, managed not only to keep their share of the electorate (48 percent) on board for the second ballot but even to win over another 4.4 percent of voters. Lacalle's mission, by contrast, was more difficult and finally proved impossible. If he were to trump Mujica, he had to try to win over not only all the Colorado voters (17 percent), who had been urged by Pedro Bordaberry to lend their support to Lacalle in the runoff, but also all the supporters of the Partido Independiente (2.5 percent) in addition to his own PN support, standing at 29 percent. In the first few days of November, the so-called "Feldman incident" lost valuable time for the PN campaign. In the aftermath of a fire close to Montevideo the chance discovery was made of an arsenal of weapons. Their owner, auditor Saúl Feldman, became involved in a firefight with police surrounding his house, during which both a police officer and Feldman himself were killed. In the course of the ensuing investigations, it was first of all former president Jorge Battle (PC), later followed by several leading PN politicians, who made allusions hinting loudly at a connection between the arsenal and the MPP, the party led by José Mujica. PN deputy Gustavo Borsari even initiated a parliamentary inquiry (interpelación) into minister of the interior Jorge Bruni and

defense minister Gonzalo Fernández; an action which prompted critical murmurings from within the ranks of the PN itself. No connection between the weapons cache and the MPP and Mujica could be established. The PN thus lost a whole week, in which it was unable to concentrate on the tasks described above or on convincing voters to support its aspiration to form the next government. In the remaining time before the run-off, Lacalle fell back repeatedly on his rallying cry of "balance". What exactly he meant by this never became fully clear. One possible interpretation was that this term was intended to portray the Lacalle-Larrañaga "fórmula" as balanced and moderate, in contrast to Mujica. It might also have been a hint at a possible power-sharing arrangement between the FA and the PN in parliament and the executive, should Lacalle win the election. The fact that it was unclear what was meant by the "balance" concept with all its room for interpretation must be seen as a weakness of the campaign.

That Mujica won the run-off so convincingly should not serve to gloss over the fact that the second FA government will have to deal with considerable challenges. Much of the work will require consensus with the opposition. To this end, the work will need the basis of a solid foundation, even though the FA commands a parliamentary majority. The president-elect is clearly aware of this: calls for unity resounded everywhere on election night. A first step had already been taken by the incumbent president Tabaré Vázquez. Even before Election Day he had announced that he would congratulate the winner in person. Accordingly, he made his way to the hotel close to the Río de la Plata in Montevideo Old Town where José Mujica and Danilo Astori were waiting with their supporters for the results. Vázquez thanked all the voters and emphasized that, with this election, Uruguay had again passed the democratic test with flying colors. He had already spoken by phone with the losing candidate, Luis Alberto Lacalle, and had reminded him that he himself had also once emerged the loser from a presidential election (in 2004 against the then Partido Colorado candidate Jorge Battle) and could readily sympathize with Lacalle's situation.

Mujica now has to prove that he is the president of all Uruguayans ("El presidente de todos") and that he has what it takes to unite the country. This is how he will ultimately be judged by both his own and opposition supporters. The opposition itself now has to fulfill its campaign promise of cooperation with the FA government.

What can be expected of this unconventional new president? He himself said in an interview with a Uruguayan TV station that he saw his mandate from the voters as being to fulfil their desire for change and reform, but without revolution or adventurism. "*Cambio non troppo*", as Mujica put it. Uruguayan voters are, after all, conservative. When it comes to involvement in impor-

tant issues of national interest, the opposition will take him at his word and call on him to fulfil the pledge he made to bring them on board.

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