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Uruguay

“Change without rupture” or “Reformism without reforms”!

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The leftwing coalition Encuentro Progresista - Frente Amplio - Nueva Mayoría triumphed at the Uruguayan elections of October 31, 2004, with Tabaré Vázquez of the Socialist Party being elected president in the first round with 51% of the vote. The left also won a majority of seats in the bicameral Parliament, which has a lower chamber of 99 deputies and a 30-strong senate. The new president will assume office in March 2005.

On the same date a plebiscite seeking to incorporate into the Constitution an article forbidding the privatization of water and any kind of concession to private enterprise in this area was carried with more than 60% voting in favour. The Spanish company Uragua, which had sought the total privatization of water, has abandoned its attempts.

We publish here an interview with Ernesto Herrera which was carried out before the elections and which presents the viewpoint of Corriente de Izquierda (CI, Left Current), a small component of the radical left which is part of the Frente Amplio. The CI made a “technical agreement” with other forces of the radical left inside the Frente Amplio under the name “For a sovereign country”, which won 3.46% of the votes (38,301 votes in total).

Everything indicates that the electoral victory of the left is inevitable this time.

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Tabaré Vázquez

It's true; nobody thinks that Tabaré Vázquez can lose. This is how the situation is perceived in the social movements, the trades unions and student organizations, the popular neighbourhoods, among the discontented middle class and, above all, among the activists in the left parties. [1] There is a similar appreciation even among the propertied classes and inside the media controlled by the economic powers. Even the international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank (WB) take this reality into account. That is why they have already had a number of meetings with Vázquez's economic advisers.

But we should nuance the term “left”. Words have their meaning, and it is better not to confuse things. The programmatic proposals presented under the rubric of “possible change” are presented as being progressive, the political-electoral alliance as being centre left. The main figures of the Encuentro Progresista and the Frente Amplio have adopted a discourse consisting in differentiating themselves from what we understand by left in the strictest sense of the term. They take their distance from all that could be identified with protest or social rebellion, the class struggle and any manifestation of anti-imperialism.

But a triumph for Tabaré Vázquez would nonetheless have a strong impact on a political system marked historically by bourgeois bipartyism.

Beating the right and forming a national government is certainly a very significant event. That will deal a fatal blow to bourgeois bipartyism, which is in a full process of decomposition. That would have consequences for the key posts at the level of the executive of the bourgeois state.

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Raoul Sendic

For example, when it is said that a historic leader of the Tupamaros [2] like senator José Mujica for example, could become minister for Production and Development, or that some socialist, communist and even trade union leaders

could participate in the government or fill some of the 3,000 key posts linked to the state apparatus, these are signs that a change will take place in the traditional Uruguayan political system.

But all this still takes place within the perspective of a change without rupture. The electoral campaign - which up until now has taken place practically without mass mobilizations - anticipates the type of government that is envisaged. The “possible change” is linked to the “defeat of poverty”, to the reversal of the “paralysis of the country”, a “peaceful transition” and identification with the “democratic traditions” which have an impact particularly on the “citizen of the centre”.

Things should not be confused - nothing in all this changes the essential nature of the regime of domination, above all if we accept the thesis that a “progressive triumph” could open a phase of relative instability in political terms, following precisely the changes in the personnel of the apparatus of the bourgeois state.

So you do not share the opinions of others on the left who think a progressive government could be conceived as a “historic defeat” of the political right and neoliberalism.

In the Frente Amplio the concept of “institutional loyalty” has been invented. At the time, the Corriente de Izquierda was the only member organization of the Frente that opposed it. The conclusion is very simple; this conception leads to unlimited respect for all the rules of the game of so-called “representative liberal democracy”. The central axis of the coalition qualified as progressive is to ensure that this “possible change” takes place in a framework of “democratic governability”. That is to say, in a framework that can contain eventual social upheavals, reduce so-called “corporate” demands and disrupt any social movement that goes beyond the limits imposed by “liberal democracy”.

It is true that the more conservative and reactionary politicians will be excluded from the government. But the strategy of progressivism implies the formation of a coalition government with the fractions and leaders of the bourgeois parties, with significant layers of the propertied class. And the strategy of alliance with fractions of the bourgeoisie is vital in order to support the project of a “productive Uruguay”. This latter is founded on the idea of a broad “dialogue for growth”. And with this goal in mind, the dominant progressive forces accelerate the movement to establish mechanisms of negotiation that will assure social peace between employers and workers.

If we add to this the political crisis of the parties of the right, we understand better why there no longer exists a veto by the bourgeois elites or the military or imperialism on an eventual “left government”. We cannot then in any manner speak of a “historic rout” of the right. It's an exaggeration.

So we cannot speak of a popular victory?

You can in a certain way. The immense majority of the popular movement, the workers, the unemployed, the left militants, youth, the human rights organizations, see it as a political triumph that belongs to them. They see it as the result of a long history of accumulation of struggles by workers and students, democratic mobilizations, and anti-neoliberal resistance

But it would not be very responsible to claim that we are witnessing an advance in radical democratic, anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist consciousness. It is still harder to say that the relationship of forces between labour and capital will be changed. It is very debatable to say that a victory for the Frente Amplio could open a dynamic going in the direction of deepening the class struggle.

We need to try to distinguish different aspects. It's true that a layer of militants and people exists who are involved in the social struggles and who sense that the “time of the people”, of transformation, has come. They see the conquest of governmental power as a means of approaching the seizure of power. It's a bit like the elaborations in the 1960s and 1970s on the strategy of revolution by stages. [3] This idea is still present on the left and in the different organizations of the Frente. Many Tupamaros militants think that the drift to the right of their main leaders and the proposal for an alliance with the “national bourgeoisie” represents a simple operation of camouflage with the aim of winning the elections.

Nonetheless, there are other aspects that need to be taken into consideration. For example nearly 40 per cent of the current electorate of the Frente Amplio consider themselves as “centre-left democrats”. The working class component is also much less important in the structure of the Frente than in the past. It is also important to note that “moderate” positions were largely victorious at the last Congress in December 2003. All this favours the strategy of “possible change”.

In terms of the government's programme, are substantial changes proposed?

The centre left character of the Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoria alliance represents a break with the founding programme of the Frente Amplio in 1971. This was a democratic, anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist programme which, even if it did not define itself as socialist, had an anti-capitalist dynamic (taking account of a national and regional pre-revolutionary conjuncture). The 30 governmental measures presented in 1971 had, in this sense, an identical character to the 40 measures of Popular Unity in Allende's Chile.

Agrarian reform, nationalization of the banking sector, state monopoly of foreign trade, the non-payment of the foreign debt, for example, have disappeared from the programme. Currently there is not even any challenge on the question of banking secrecy. There is no mention of radical tax reform to cut into capitalist profits and big fortunes, or taxing the movements of speculative financial capital.

There is no longer any question of rupture with the hard core of the neoliberal matrix, nor with the conditions imposed by the international financial institutions. Uruguay will continue to respect the compromise imposed by the Letters of Intent [4] and to accept the primary budget surplus imposed by the IMF. This implies that it is necessary to pay the interest on the foreign debt which is equivalent to 35% of the country's exports. There is no questioning of the private pension funds or the “reform” of the state.

It is also significant that the announcement of the choice of economy minister in the person of Danilo Astori, senator and economist of the social-liberal wing of the Frente Amplio, was made in Washington, not anywhere else.

The programme of progressivism is no threat to the capitalists. It envisages a very gradual application of the tax on incomes and the wealth of the rich, presented as a mechanism for the “redistribution of wealth”, such that this measure will probably have no impact. There is no “salariazó” (massive increase in real wages) to recuperate the purchasing power that has been massively undermined. There are also no proposals either to suppress the various taxes, which affect wage contributions for pensions, or to lower VAT, which is currently at 23%. Some weeks ago the Frente Amplio leadership even refused to fix a percentage increase in the minimum wage (currently US\$75 a month) in the event of it coming to government. [5]

The only measures that remain are an Emergency Social Plan, and using part of the significant savings from the pension funds for a plan of housing construction as a measure to reactivate employment. There are also projects for increasing investment in the fields of health and education, but no concrete measures have been formulated.

All the political resolutions of the Second and Third Congresses of the Corriente de Izquierda (2001 and 2002) defined the nature of the programme of the Frente as that of a “reformism without reforms”. In other words, without the structural reforms necessary to counteract the process of denationalization and privatization of the economy. And this definition remains more valid than ever.

Can we conclude from this that you say there that there will be a neoliberal continuity, as with the Lula government, and that the process of privatization will deepen?

There will be a sort of mitigated neoliberalism, in which “distributive justice” will be focused on the “most vulnerable sectors”, the so-called excluded. The Emergency Social Plan, for example, envisages “reorienting social priorities” in a sense of compensation and assistance. And it is planned to finance this Plan with a part of the income originating from public enterprise and “social loans” from the World Bank, which has already agreed to grant them.

But I stress that there will be no rupture with a model which protects the social war of capital against labour, destroying conquests and rights, destabilizing those who have a stable job, creating confrontation between the “privileged” (workers in the public sector) and those of the private and/or “informal” sector. All this will lead to a fracturing of cohesion and collective social links.

A lot is said about reinvigorating the “regulatory” role of the state, of “retaking sovereign control of decisions” and reestablishing the social and “protective” role of the state. But all this comes up against the barrier of capitalist globalization, the conditions imposed by the international financial institutions. And the progressive government does not envisage challenging these conditions.

On the process of privatization, I think that there will be some differences in relation to what happened in Brazil. The governments of the Colorado party and the National party have applied a neoliberal agenda in terms of privatization as in other South American countries, because we have a “cursed heritage” in this area. There has been subcontracting, concessions, greater flexibility of labour, but the process of large-scale privatization has been much slower than elsewhere. And here, resistance and popular mobilization have played a central role.

It should not be forgotten that two referendums were organized and won (in December 1992 and December 2003). They prevented the privatization of big public enterprises (telecommunications, electricity, oil industry). Beyond this, on October 31, 2004, there will also be a vote on a plebiscite seeking to incorporate into the Constitution an article forbidding the privatization of water and any kind of concession to private enterprise in this area

That sets a limit to the attempts to go further down the road of dismantling of state enterprises. In this sense, the social resistance has been very radical, and the popular opposition is very strong. We can say that Uruguay (with Argentina post-2001) is the South American country where privatization has met the highest level of resistance.

We can obviously not totally rule out a priori a road as openly neoliberal as that taken by Lula. I say only that there are certain limits that it will be hard to cross. Both Vázquez and his economic advisors envisage the possibility of “associating” public enterprises with private (particularly foreign) capital. Danilo Astori and other leaders of the Encuentro Progresista are partisans of eliminating the statute guaranteeing the job security of civil servants. But they cannot do this without meeting great resistance from the workers. What’s more, an initiative of this type will lead to a conflict with the trade union leaders and the PIT-CNT union federation, because nearly 65% of union members are employees of the public sector. The alliance with the union leadership is decisive for social peace.

The governments of Argentina and Brazil are looking forward to the possibility of a Vasquez government.

Undoubtedly. A progressive government would have well protected flanks, to the extent that the governments of Kirchner and Lula have ideological affinities, above all for reasons of regional geopolitics. A government of the Encuentro Progresista will strengthen the conception held by many people of an “anti-neoliberal” Mercosur which would be in a better position to negotiate the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) with the US and the European Union, although the recent trade agreement between the Mercosur and the EU, which should be ratified, is as bad as that of the FTAA. In all cases, these agreements are limited to negotiating the terms of dependency between the “imperialist centre” and the countries of the periphery.

One of the distinctive features of the Frente Amplio was a participatory organizational structure which exercised control over the leadership. Does this still exist?

All this ideological-programmatic recycling has been accompanied by a key element, the fact that the rank and file committees have been emptied of their content and distorted. These committees established in the neighbourhoods, the workplaces, the enterprises, the study centres and among the intellectual circles, were initially the veritable backbone of the Front. As an experience born out of participatory democracy, they organized, making agitation and propaganda. Reflections and debates in assemblies did not lead to paralysis, but on the contrary strengthened a political and social action of confrontation. In this sense, the rank and file committees were the twin brothers of the Committees of Popular Unity in Chile.

Today none of this exists any more. The committees, the coordinations and the national plenum are only a functional caricature of what is cooked up on high and secretly by Tabaré Vázquez and the parliamentary fraction. The organic structure of the Frente is a heavy bureaucratic apparatus, where democracy is conspicuous in its absence and where those who are the most dynamic, young, combative and committed to the social struggles are not directly involved.

What are now the majority forces in the Frente Amplio?

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There is the Movement of Popular Participation (an alliance of the Tupamaros with sectors of the nationalist left and bourgeois fractions which have broken with the traditional parties of the right) and the Socialist Party (which identifies with the Spanish PSOE and the French PS). Then there is Asamblea Uruguay and Vertiente Artiguista (which are a mixture of social-liberalism, the third way and social democracy).

Does the Communist Party still have an important influence?

It is much weakened. However, it still has a considerable implantation in the trade unions and some popular neighbourhoods. Recently there has been an internal crisis that has led to the split of its youth organization, which now hesitates between giving its support to the radical left and participating directly in the elections. This split happened because the CP supported the strategy of the majority forces of the Frente Amplio.

In this context, I imagine that the situation of the radical left must be very difficult?

The radical left is on the defensive. It faces a scenario where “revolutionary accumulation” - as axis of delimitation in the field of the class struggle - must be (re) thought and (re) organized. It is currently in a kind of labyrinth, and swimming against the tide of the “possible”. There are two kinds of danger, that of adaptation to the triumphalist pressure of progressivism (so as not to stay isolated and on the margins) or that of a withdrawal, awaiting the disappointment that will be generated by a “reformist” experience led by the government. Moreover, its electoral visibility is minimal. If we include the 26 de Marzo (a Castroist tendency) and the Corriente de Izquierda as being the forces which are the most expressive of the radical left, they have hardly 3% of the vote inside the Frente Amplio.

That is not enough to guarantee the election of a national deputy.

Is there a coordination or unitary programmatic agreement of this radical left in the Frente Amplio?

Very little. Just a punctual agreement, what is called in Uruguay a “technical agreement” to accumulate votes. This agreement was made under the rubric “For a sovereign country”. It includes: a moratorium and audit of the foreign debt, suppression of banking secrecy, the elimination of pension funds and the abrogation of the law on impunity of state terrorism under the military dictatorship (a law that a government of the Encuentro Progresista envisages keeping). The Corriente de Izquierda, for its part, proposes a Law of Popular Initiative establishing economic, social and democratic rights for workers. But one cannot say that there is a coordination or a clear programmatic agreement. For example, in the National Convention of the Encuentro Progresista in June 2004 the Corriente de Izquierda voted in a completely isolated manner against the proposed governmental programme.

What is the dynamic of the Corriente de Izquierda?

Things should be placed in their context. The Corriente de Izquierda is a small organization, with some hundreds of militants implanted throughout the country and in the main movements. It is a political force which is very active in all the social struggles. But nonetheless it is very much a minority force, including on the electoral level, where this current can win around 10,000 votes. At the same time, it is threatened by the two dangers that I previously mentioned. In this sense, we cannot hide the fact that we are going through a crisis of perspective of accumulation of militant forces and that we face uncertainties on orientation with a view to reorganizing the revolutionary forces.

Outside of the Frente Amplio, are there significant radical left forces?

In particular there are the social movements, like the human rights groups, the popular soup kitchens, the youth organizations and some class oriented trade unions. Here we see an anti-authority practice and criticisms of the institutionalized left. These are sectors who take as their reference point - even if in a confused manner - other Latin American experiences like Mexican Zapatismo, the piqueteros and the neighbourhood assemblies of Argentina, the insurreccional movements in Bolivia, the initiatives of the landless in Brazil. Many of these militants participated with the Frente left at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and the Regional Forums, as well as in the anti-imperialist campaigns against the war, payment of the foreign debt and against the FTAA. The active members of these movements are also involved in the campaigns of solidarity with Cuba and Venezuela or against Plan Colombia.

All the analyses and news on the economic situation indicate that there is a certain upturn, but that the social crisis remains very serious.

The so-called “upturn” is essentially founded on an international conjuncture favourable to export prices of meat, wool and dairy products. The agro-export sector, which is decisive in Uruguay, is accumulating ever-higher profits. That gives the impression that the economic-financial crisis of 2002 has been overcome. But that is false. The socio-economic crisis is of crushing brutality. More than 850,000 people live in poverty (the total population is 3.2 million); 54% of children live in poor families, and destitution has tripled since 2002. There are 200,000 unemployed and 550,000 precarious workers, out of an economically active population of a little more than 1.3 million. And real wages have fallen by nearly 30% in two years.

It is obvious that, in this picture of desolation, the Emergency Social Plan cannot resolve the problem of general impoverishment of the population. It will at best bring some palliative measures for the “hardest hit”.

Has this crisis situation led to a response, a social resistance?

In this process of crisis, the popular resistance has been very broad. It is prolonged, developing a multiplicity of struggles, demands and forms of organization and self-organization, in the trade unions, the housing cooperatives, and the committees of the unemployed, high school students, and the neighbourhood movements. But this resistance remains fragmented. In any case, even if we are going through a period of defensive struggle, the brutality of the bourgeois offensive and the socio-economic disaster that it has led to create conditions for developing a radical potentiality in significant layers of the workers, popular and youth movements. These layers in struggle assume consciously the necessity of breaking with the logic of the social pact, of the “productive country” and at the end of the day with the logic of reducing social mobilization in defence of “partial conquests”, as advocated by “reformism”.

Certainly the majority of these social militants will vote for progressivism to kick the bourgeois right wing out of government. But that does not mean neither approval of their policies, nor a blank cheque, nor illusions about profound changes under a government led by Tabaré Vázquez. On the contrary, this layer of militants and popular organizers, social agitators and radical political cadres, vote in the framework of a continuity and a deepening of the process of resistance and revolutionary accumulation. It is among these layers of people engaged in social struggles that a radical left should act. Not to impose theories or a “line” from the outside, not to form general commands which would lead the troops in combat. For it is decisive that the revolutionary socialist forces respect the autonomy of the social movements in their capacity to define the rhythms and objectives of confrontation with the propertied classes and the neoliberal programme.

Is there the possibility of a rupture between the radical left and the Frente Amplio?

For the moment, there are only murmurs. Some layers of militants have begun to take an interest in the experience which has led to the setting up of the PSOL (Party of Socialism and Liberty) in Brazil [6], following the capitulation of Lula and the debacle of the “left” of the PT. Others say “we stay in the Frente until they throw us out”. But, undoubtedly, the horizon for a break is being established, and not in the long term. In the Corriente de Izquierda, for example, many comrades are agreed on the fact that the leadership of the Frente Amplio is beyond redress. And they think it for quite a while. Beyond redress not in the sense that it could adopt an anti-capitalist programme, but even in the sense of the adoption of a programme of more or less profound reforms. The breadth of the drift to the right corresponds, among other reasons, to a deeper national and regional change, and to the non-convergence between social and political struggles in the course of recent years. That means that the relationship of forces inside of the Frente Amplio has worsened. That will be the theme at the centre of our Fourth National Congress, of which the date will be fixed after the elections.

[1] All the left parties are part of this vast coalition created in the framework of the struggle against the dictatorship, which formally ended in 1985.

[2] Movement of National Liberation (MLN), whose best-known emblematic figure was Raoul Sendic.

[3] That is, a democratic, anti-imperialist stage with an alliance with the bourgeois sectors, then a stage of democratic and popular deepening of the process. The CP theorist Arismendi developed this strategy in Uruguay and Latin America.

[4] “Letters of Intent” are commitments by the state to the IMF on economic policy. In particular, the guarantee of the primary budget surplus, or a surplus before payment of the interest on the foreign debt.

[5] The World Bank fixes the poverty threshold at 2 dollars per person per day.

[6] For the Brazilian debate on the setting up of the PSoL see [IV 362](#).