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ELECTIONS IN URUGUAY: Same colours, new government, greater challenges

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After a resounding victory in the first round of voting, with the candidate from the ruling party prevailing by more than 17 points over his closest competitor (Luis Lacalle Pou of the Partido Nacional (PN)), few doubts remained about who would eventually be elected in these elections. Former president Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) received 56% of the vote; the best result for a Uruguayan head of state in the last 70 years.

The new president has managed to maintain high levels of public approval for both his administration and his personal image, which, in Uruguay, is even superior to that of José Mujica himself. Tabaré Vázquez becomes the third consecutive president from the ranks of the Frente Amplio (FA), a coalition of left-wing parties formed 43 years ago that definitively broke with the country's classical bipartisanship.

The good results in the first round were reflected in the formation of the parliament, with a majority won in both chambers. In the senate, the FA has 15 seats, to which may be added the vice-president, who acts as president of the senate with the right to take the floor and vote. In the chamber of representatives they won 50 of the 99 seats.

On November 30th, after confirming his victory, Tabaré Vázquez gave a speech in which he made clear that his second mandate, "will not be more of the same, because the Uruguay of today is neither that of 2005 nor that of 2010". In fact, this time it will be different for a number of reasons, both positive and negative, and because of the new challenges that this government will have to face.

On the one hand, economically, Vázquez inherits a much more stable, more robust country. Uruguay has been in a period of boom for over a decade, and in that time macroeconomic indices have notably improved. Unemployment is below 6%, income per head has risen to \$16,351 (the second highest in Latin America), inflation has not exceeded 8.5% and levels of poverty are below 6%, according to World Bank data (2013).

Nevertheless, two main subjects are pending resolution: education and citizen safety. On the first of these, the country must overcome the deficiencies in its edu-

education system— problems with teacher training, high rates of drop-out and of school years being repeated, and teaching salaries in need of an update. In 2012, alarms were again sounded when Uruguay had its worst results in the PISA exams since 2003. During his campaign, Tabaré Vázquez committed to raising the education budget to 6% of GDP, in line with union demands. However, there is disagreement about its distribution. The money is to be spent not only on pay rises (as the teaching unions request) but also on a wider array of improvements. Some are fairly ambitious, such as the aim of ensuring that, by 2020, 100% of students complete their basic educational cycle and that 100% of 17-year-olds are in the education system. The policies form part of a plan that brings together the first ten actions his administration would carry out if elected, which was presented in June 2014.

Although Uruguay is one of the safest countries in Latin America, the population believes insecurity to be its greatest problem (Latinobarómetro, 2013). The perceived lack of safety is tangible at all levels of society, reoffending rates continue to be of concern, the number of robberies has grown considerably and the prison population exceeds its capacity. Faced with this complex challenge, Tabaré Vázquez has already decided to continue with Eduardo Bonomi as minister for the interior, who has the main responsibility for security. The opposition rejects the continuity, condemning the lack of effective responses to crime during the Mujica government. The “decalogue” of urgent measures for the new leader on this subject includes the creation of an “Integral Public Security Plan to integrate the specific social policies: education, work [and] prisons, both preventative and punitive*”.

Similarly, other issues will be key in the upcoming five-year period. Without doubt, one of these will be dealing with a senate stuffed with well-known figures. Although, as we mentioned, the FA will enjoy an absolute majority in the upper chamber, its composition may provoke more than one internal debate. Within the ranks of the ruling party, the faction led by José Mujica (Movimiento de Participación Popular (MPP)) will have 6 of the FA’s 15 senators. The current president has well-known differences with his vice-president, Danilo Astori, the leader of the Frente Líber Seregni (FLS), and minister of the economy designate, on issues such as the “land tax”, relationships with Argentina and Venezuela and the country’s role in Mercosur. The FLS won three seats in the senate, but Astori will not take the one that corresponds to him because he is taking up the economic portfolio.

The presidential candidates from Uruguay’s two traditional parties will also be in the chamber: Luis Lacalle Pou (PN) and Pedro Bordaberry (PC). In this setting, Tabaré Vázquez made it clear in his post-election speech that the government will call for dialogue between the various political forces, taking in all sections of society in order to debate and “reach concrete solutions” on the most relevant issues in the lead up to 2020.

With regard to relations with Argentina, during the first Vázquez presidency, tensions rose between the Río de la Plata neighbours over the installation of the “Botnia” pulp mill. Accusations were traded, roads were closed and Argentina appealed to the International Court of Justice, and these were just some of the consequences of this friction. The recently-elected leader has admitted asking the George W. Bush administration for support in the case of the conflict’s possible escalation. During his extensive campaign, the new president made it clear that he would maintain good relations with Argentina and that the events “are already history”. On the Argentinian side, when the president, Fernández de Kirchner, learned of the FA’s victory, she congratulated the new head of government. In the short term, Tabaré Vázquez will put the new tenor of Argentina-Uruguay relations to the test as he has a decision to make on whether to increase production at the

mentioned plant or not. This would not only involve increasing production but would also raise the clear possibility of the Finnish company building two more plants in the north of the country. But by doing this, the Uruguayan government would, on the other hand, expose itself to weakened relations with its neighbours and a new appeal to international justice.

Other key issues on the new administration's agenda will be the regulation of the consumption and sale of marijuana, compensation for the victims of the Tupamaros in the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, and asylum for the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, among others.

At first sight the electoral results, the great popular acceptance of Tabaré Vázquez, the good functioning of the economy, the good social indicators and the possibilities of large investment in the country suggest a successful mandate. However, there are potential points of conflict at both internal and external levels that may bring about a series of inconveniences in the next five years. It will be a matter of observing how an experienced politician like Vázquez carries out his duties, grappling with the potential conflicts that may be crucial to Uruguay's future.