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Can Uruguay resist Latin America's authoritarian reflex?

After the upcoming elections, the continent's showpiece left-wing alliance Frente Amplio might not be governing anymore

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After achieving great successes, South America's showpiece leftist coalition in Uruguay might be voted out anyway. After nearly 15 years of progressive governments, the small country on the Río de la Plata is the most democratic, social, least economically unequal and, in terms of income per capita, most affluent country in South America. In the elections at the end of October, however, the governing Frente Amplio (FA) could lose its absolute majority in both chambers of the General Assembly. The latest polls put it 'only' at just under 40 per cent. Its presidential candidate, the former Mayor of Montevideo, Daniel Martínez, is likely to have a tough race.

His expected opponent in the runoff is Luis Lacalle Pou from the conservative Partido Nacional (PN). Although he has few ideas of his own and has been languishing at around 22 per cent for months, Pou will be supported in the second round of voting by all those who are united by a single goal: to oust the FA. This includes the 'Colorados', who have had a liberal revival under economist Ernesto Talvi and are polling at 17 per cent. There is also a new, reactionary movement called 'Cabildo Abierto' (CA), currently at 12 per cent, which is likely to come out of its first election as the fourth strongest party. Its rapid rise is based on the same tectonic shift tearing up the political landscape in other countries in the region: the discrediting of politics and playing on fear and alienation.

The elections in Uruguay are therefore not only a test of whether South America's showpiece left-wing alliance can continue to govern. They will also show whether Uruguayan society and the progressive project can stand up against the anti-democratic trends of our age.

Countering the authoritarian reflex

Stable institutions, low corruption, the political culture of dialogue and a broad republican consensus provide a healthy foundation – so far the election campaign has been spared any major scandals. Following this tradition, all parliamentary parties signed a political pact before campaigning started to fight against the dissemination of fake news. One of the outcomes is an effective, non-partisan fact-checking initiative.

This confidence in democratic institutions, albeit stronger than pretty much anywhere else in the region, has nevertheless been declining for years. While the politically active businessmen Edgardo Novick and Juan Sartori have been cultivating derogatory discourse against 'politicians' for some time, they are being outdone by the former army commander Guido Manini Rios, who was sacked at the start of the year for his attacks on the justice system. While the three traditional parties compete for the centre ground, his Cabildo Abierto movement has been drumming up support with the simple promise to finally restore 'order'.

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Internal security is the key issue in the election campaign. Manini Rios shares Lacalle Pou's alarmist rhetoric of a 'national emergency' and his resorting to repressive measures to solve the problem. The PN's right wing launched a petition, 'Life Without Fear', to force a referendum on the militarisation of internal security, which will now be held concurrently with the elections. A broad alliance of social movements and trade unions is mobilising against this misguided constitutional reform. Even large parts of the PN itself have rejected these reactionary measures.

Even if the referendum ultimately fails, however, Lacalle Pou – should he win the election – will have to bring its supporters on side in order to govern. It's even more alarming that the FA itself has so far failed to counter the fear-driven, authoritarian reflex with an effective, progressive plan, for example to improve the rehabilitation of offenders and the quality of public education. While it has now unveiled a balanced 12-point plan, on the campaign trail the issue remains an unedifying contest to take the toughest stance.

Frente Amplio's successes in government

The FA has had more success in recent years at entrenching citizens' rights, a sphere in which it has gained cultural hegemony. None of the major parties are openly attacking this agenda in the election campaign. However, the call for the 'restoration of traditional family values', popular with certain parts of the conservative opposition, masks its rejection of legal abortion, equal marriage, LGBTI rights and the legalisation of cannabis. This opposition is also coming from evangelical churches, which are currently gaining influence within the PN.

These actors are constantly attacking so-called 'gender ideology' and forced a pre-referendum on the abolition of the recent law to reduce structural discrimination against transgender individuals. This pre-referendum failed, however, with support from only 10 per cent of the electorate. Uruguay's immense societal progress is being defended in the same place it originated: on the streets. There are regular demonstrations numbering in the tens of thousands calling for the continuation of this progress.

The right-wing opposition agrees on the second key issue of the election campaign: economy and work. They use alarmist rhetoric, claiming that growing public debt and the recent drop in the number of jobs amounts to an emergency. However, they are not all too keen to draw attention to their familiar neoliberal solutions of austerity and deregulation – partly because neighbouring Argentina under President Mauricio Macri is currently foundering spectacularly with this very strategy. In contrast, Uruguay still enjoys the longest period of growth in its history, despite all the recent dents in economic activity and regional crises. Moreover, it has proved that redistribution and the expansion of workers' rights leads to sustainable growth.

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The FA governments' pro-worker policies have strengthened the trade unions to the extent that no government will be able to rule against them. This is the biggest guarantee against the subversion of the collective bargaining principle and against attacks on social policy. And the conservatives will not be able to downsize the state, including tax cuts, without breaking their election promise not to cut spending on education, healthcare and security – the very three areas in which the FA has expanded state provision.

The limits of Uruguay's development model

So why is the FA nonetheless on the defensive against an opposition with so few ideas? This has a lot to do with the inevitable wear and tear after 15 years in government. However, the FA has also appropriated the discourse of fear, and not only with regards to the security issue. Fears of recession – which ultimately never came – overshadowed the whole of the last administration and curbed the FA's reforming zeal. Above all, it did not have the courage to tackle the necessary conflicts of interest in order to take the development model, based on the agro-industry and primary exports, to the next level.

The limits of the development model are becoming clear with slower growth, declining employment and polluted water. In areas such as socio-ecological transformation, diversification of the production model and conservation of natural resources, the conservatives are threatening to overtake the FA on the left. The FA is only realising this now, on the campaign trail. At the same time, it continues to pursue an investment and trade policy that will increase dependence on raw materials.

On a positive note, this forces the FA to bring in fresh faces and new ideas. The leadership trio of Pepe Mujica, Danilo Astori and Tabaré Vazquez, all close to 80, is stepping back. Only the elections will show which potential successors can back up their ambitions with votes, and what the new balance of power within the FA will be. The transition from the second to the third generation in the leadership of the FA has been fraught with internal tensions. This goes some way to explain why the current campaign is less well coordinated and slower to get going than previous ones.

Out of fear of losing its most important political asset, namely the exceptional unity of the centre-left spectrum under its banner, the FA has made a number of fudged compromises in its manifesto. This is particularly true in the three areas that young people most care about today: feminism, the environment and alternatives to repressive security policy. Martínez' manifesto has responded to this by promising gender parity in the cabinet, for example. And innovative new feminist groups such as 'El Abrazo' are stepping up with the intention of getting these social movements' concerns a hearing within the FA. The survival of the FA and its unity depends partly on the success of these efforts.

Thus, there is more at stake in Uruguay than who will be allowed to govern. It's clear that Uruguay's next government will have to deal with a much more fragmented parliament. There's a grave danger that this will

lend further strength to radical forces. So even if there is little threat of wholesale wipe-outs like in Brazil or Argentina, trade unions and social movements will be needed more than ever. They must stand in the way of inflammatory fearmongering and reactionary and neoliberal excesses – and call for and drive the rejuvenation of the FA.



Sebastian Sperling
Buenos Aires

Sebastian Sperling heads the Friedrich-Eberts-Stiftung's office in Argentina and is editor-in-chief of the journal *Nueva Sociedad*. He previously worked for the FES in South Africa, Uruguay, Nigeria, Kenya and Berlin.