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Left un-splintered

How Uruguay's Frente Amplio, a coalition of 40 progressive forces, defies the right-wing assault on Latin America

Read this interview in German.

On 28 October 2018, Jair Messias Bolsonaro won a divisive election campaign for the Brazilian presidency against Fernando Haddad from the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT). His victory marked a dramatic shift to the right in the world's fourth largest democracy. While there's a noticeable trend towards right-wing politics among Latin American countries, Uruguay seems to defy it - so far. Its Frente Amplio (FA) government, Uruguay's centre-left to left-wing coalition of several political parties, seems to be able to hold its ground in the country.

Claudia Detsch spoke to Sebastian Sperling in Montevideo about the challenges for left-wing politics in Uruguay and Latin America.

With his fascist sloganeering and extreme polarisation, Jair Bolsonaro fought and won a divisive election campaign in Brazil. With one year left until the presidential elections here in Uruguay, is a similar danger to democracy looming?

"Today is the end of the PT in Brazil– and next year, it'll be the turn of the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay." Well, that's the situation at least according to whole-page adverts in the Uruguayan press taken out by entrepreneur-turned-politician Edgardo Novick. Yet the fact that even he, the most populist voice in the country's opposition, distanced himself from Bolsonaro's misogynist and authoritarian comments shows that Uruguay retains a far more relaxed and moderate political tone.

It's worth remembering that Uruguay's democracy is strong – *TheEconomist* counts it next to Canada as the only fully democratic system in the Americas – and that this is in no small part due to the political reforms undertaken by the FA. While trust in the democratic system and political parties is also declining here, it remains higher

than in other countries in the region.

The party-political system, too, is still quite stable, with FA as one of the few remaining parties with a strong grass-roots membership. What is more, as a result of the poisonous electoral campaigns elsewhere in the region, an important debate has begun about how cross-party consensus can be reached against disinformation and the spread of fake news.

So is Uruguay immune to the anti-political, anti-democratic tendencies of the region?

No, it certainly isn't. The influence of evangelical fundamentalists is on the rise, and many of the typical right-wing populists arguments attract support here, too. As such, the FA government can be proud of the fact that it expanded legal rights for transsexuals at precisely the same time as Bolsonaro was riding a homophobic wave of resentment into the Brazilian presidency.

Nevertheless, the ire of the hard right against this kind of 'politics for minorities' will only fail to ignite for as long as the FA provides satisfactory answers to the issues which are important to the majority of people. Only by keeping this balance is it possible to clearly separate legitimate criticism of the effects of neoliberal globalisation from full-frontal assaults on the values of openness, solidarity, democracy, and human rights.

Thus far, the FA seems to have been successful in keeping this balance: in terms of social indicators and economic statistics, Uruguay consistently tops regional rankings. Is it reaping the political rewards, though?

It would be a mistake to build a campaign for the upcoming elections based on yesterday's achievements – the kind of mistake which almost cost the FA the last election, actually. It's certainly true that, with its genuine social-democratic policies, the FA has successfully disproved the neoliberal mantra of deregulation as a panacea. It used petitions to block privatisation as an opposition party before it even got into government. When it got into power, it pursued a proactive approach to wages, employment rights, and social policy, taking work out of the grey economy and reducing poverty as real-term wages went up strongly and the unions gained in political heft. The result is that Uruguay is experiencing the longest period of growth in its history and that those on low and medium incomes are doing far better than when the FA came to power…

… I think I hear a 'but' coming.

But those are yesterday's achievements! People are now thinking about other issues – security, for instance. While the debate about criminality may well have been alarmist and exaggerated, the FA is not getting anywhere with statistics to convince people that it's not really that bad. What is more, the limits of the model of development the country has pursued are becoming obvious.

Going forward, the FA will need to find answers to questions around the digital transformation of the economy and its effect on work, as well as the demands it will place on an education system which is currently deficient when it comes to quality and equality of opportunity. At the same time, the country's natural resources will need better protection. This is the project for the future, and neither the FA's current retreat into the details of day-to-day government policy nor a showcasing of previous achievements will be enough to keep voters on side.

The vote for Bolsonaro in Brazil was also a vote against the PT, and across the region, right-wingers' clarion call is to 'put an end to the progressive decade'. How is the FA responding to this?

The return of authoritarianism and neoliberal policy platforms is not just a result of a right-wing offensive, but of the failure of the left in consolidating and building on its successes. In terms of its overall approach, the FA is about democratic, liberal, cosmopolitan left-wing policy. Its future is dependent on several conditions: there must be a consistent, credible line against corruption, for instance, which – specifically for the FA – means convincing previous Vice-President Raúl Sendic to refrain from running for the Senate again. Last year, he was pressured into resigning by the internal party ethics commission after an embezzlement scandal.

Besides combatting corruption, what else does left-wing politics have to do to be successful?

The Uruguayan left has to draw a very clear line between itself and its former friends in Nicaragua and Venezuela. The FA can only avoid being tarred with the same brush by distancing itself unmistakeably from these authoritarian regimes when it comes to transparency, ethics, and democracy. Most importantly, however, the FA needs to put the issues I mentioned at the centre of the political debate to continue implementing its political project.

It's simply not enough to paint the election as a battle between the forces of good and evil in which the right-wing populists are depicted as the barbarians at the gates: hashtags aren't enough to shore up the ramparts. The FA needs concepts for the future, not apocalyptic

scenarios about what could happen if the other side gets into power. As the Brazilian example shows, voters are more driven by their dissatisfaction with the status quo than they are by warnings about what could come to pass.

One factor in the Uruguayan success story is that the left-wing political spectrum remains undivided. How has the splintering seen elsewhere been avoided?

The FA isn't just an electoral alliance or a movement set-up on a laptop one night, but rather the product of decades of cooperation between various grouping: in 1971, Christian democrats, socialists, communists, anarchists, and ex-*guerilleros* were all on the defensive as an authoritarian state apparatus tightened its grip on society. They had no option but to join forces if they were to break the hegemony of the two major conservative parties.

Although operating under an umbrella organisation, all of the parties and movements retained their own forms of local organisation while grouping their statutes and structures in the *Frente Amplio*, or, literally, 'broad front'. While this makes internal decision-making processes lengthy, they are democratic. The majority takes as much account as possible of minority objections and, in return, these minorities support the decisions in public. This basic political understanding can be summed up in a simple equation: ideological diversity, programmatic unity. Another way of looking at it is to say that the party prefers to focus on the lowest common denominator rather than the differences between factions. Cracks are starting to show, however, as the founding generation enters the final phases of their careers and some tensions begin to snap. It's clear that the handover to the next generation will need to be accompanied by a renewal of the founders' pact.

Many consider one of the FA's key strengths to be its openness for cooperation with civil society. How does it manage to integrate grass-roots initiatives into its political approach?

Firstly, the FA isn't a static entity, and some of the factions of which it is composed die off as the years go by while new lists of candidates stand at internal elections. Secondly, the party statutes accord the local associations a great deal of influence on the national level. This means that, despite an overall drop in membership, they remain very active. Thirdly, there's a lot of exchange between the various social initiatives, the unions, and the FA as people move from working for one to the other. Lastly, one shouldn't underestimate the importance of simple gestures towards social initiatives, like opening up the FA

headquarters as a base for demonstrations. Nevertheless, there is a rift between the FA and left-wing grass-roots organisations – and it's growing.

Why is that?

Many of the FA's most recent achievements weren't in its manifesto: equal rights for people in same-sex marriages, the legalisation of cannabis, a refusal to lower the age of criminal responsibility. At the beginning, all of these issues were viewed quite sceptically by the FA administration in power; the pressure came from the street-level. While the fact that the FA is able to integrate these initiatives is positive, a government no longer setting any serious progressive impulses starts to look like it has run its course.

The party has started to become part of the state bureaucracy as, after so many years in power, it now represents the status quo. It's difficult for the FA to present itself as a force for change and renewal, especially since it's in dire need of new blood and hasn't yet defined what its future vision will be. That is why many younger voters are now getting involved in politics through single-issue pressure groups outside of the FA.

In view of the uncomfortable political climate in the region, is there a danger that the FA will pander to nationalist sentiment?

Not at all! While the government may indeed be out on something of a limb in the region at the moment, it will continue its internationalist approach. After all, a small country like Uruguay has no choice but to proactively look for trade and investment. As such, it pursues a liberal immigration regime and has returned to being what it was before the dictatorship: a nation of immigrants – with the difference that today's new arrivals aren't coming from Europe, but rather from other countries in the region, primarily Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba.

There is some xenophobic sentiment in the population, but those expressing it are in a small minority and remain below the radar of the political debate. This may change, of course, if the crises affecting neighbouring countries become more acute and the number of migrants starts to climb.

In addition, the government is trying to work towards a more equitable international order, and the FA is currently involved in a very lively debate about how trade deals should be structured. The government is defending national regulations against proceedings brought by multinationals in international courts of arbitration. The Uruguayan administration is also keeping human rights on the global

agenda, most recently during its stint in the UN Security Council and now as a candidate for the UN Human Rights Council. The FA is therefore an important partner for Germany when it comes to taking a stand against the current nationalist and populist tendencies.



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