

URU Page

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# URUGUAY:

## Background Information

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## A. RECENT HISTORY

Since the 27th June 1973, Uruguay has been ruled by a civic-military dictatorship. The aim of this brief summary is to outline events leading up to the coup.

1. The Political System Before the Coup. Throughout most of the twentieth century Uruguay has been a constitutional democracy. A series of reforms begun by José Battlle y Ordoñez (president 1903-07 and 1911-15) guaranteed political rights; set up an advanced legal system, and laid the foundations of a welfare state. Under the 1966 constitution, elections were held every five years for the presidency, the Senate, and the Chamber of Deputies. Trade Unions and political parties organised freely.

The political system was dominated by the two traditional parties, the Colorados and the Blancos. The Colorados' long period of rule was interrupted only during the 1958-1966 period, when the Blancos won the elections.

Peculiarities in the electoral system protected these parties from the small but growing left wing organizations. Under the complex electoral law, the traditional parties could present numerous candidates at each election. The candidate with most votes within a party automatically received the votes of his less successful colleagues (who may have stood on completely different programmes). Blancos and Colorados shared out posts on the nationalised enterprises and other bodies.

Fragmented and increasingly wrought by internal divisions, the two parties were incapable of responding constructively to the economic crisis facing the country, particularly marked after 1955.

2. The Economy Uruguay's economic problems are a crucial factor in the political path the country has followed since the fifties. The key economic activities have been production of meat, wool, leather and various other agricultural goods for export. The dominant class has been the large landowning group.

After the second world war, urban industry became the dynamic sector, as a burst of import substituting industrialisation took place. The height of this boom occurred over the 1945-55 decade. After this, the process stagnated, and

per capita gross national product began a long downwards trend. Three main factors were at work -

a) The new urban industries needed imported supplies of equipment and fuel, and, in the context of the steadily worsening post war terms of trade for the Third World as a whole, these imports began to exert a strong pressure on the balance of payments. Industrial production grew at an average rate of 8.5 per cent over the 1945-55 period, but slowed down dramatically to 0.8 per cent in the following five years. The urban market was not strong enough or big enough to allow faster growth.

b) Agricultural production stagnated, contributing to the steady drop in export revenues. The inability of the government to impose reforms meant that extensive land use techniques compared to a 214 per cent increase in Mexico over the same period.

c) The state did nothing to rectify the structural problems of the economy, but contributed to them. Public investment fell; deficits were covered by printing money; underemployment in the public sector increased. The results of this failure to take positive measures were a rapidly rising rate of inflation, continual devaluations, massive falls in investment, capital flight, and worsening standards of living.

3. The Pacheco Years Jorge Pacheco Areco became president in 1967, following the death of General Gestido. They had both been elected on the Colorado ticket in 1966. His response to the crisis was to implement the economic policies of the IMF and clamp down on all forms of opposition. In June 1968, following consultations with the IMF, Pacheco froze prices and incomes. Since the last major wage agreements, prices has already increased by 64 per cent. The essence of his policy was to hold down wages, devalue so as to increase returns to the landowners, encourage exports and quell any opposition by the use of the "urgent security measures" allowed under the constitution. Nothing was done to alter the major structural defects of the economy.

The result was three years of intense social conflict. Opposition came from Congress, where a growing group of senators questioned his continual abuse of the constitution and regular reimposition of the security measures, from the trade unions which faced the largest drop in real wages in the decade, and

whose strikes were suppressed by army detachments, from students in the capital and countryside, and from an urban guerrilla movement, the Tupamaros, or Movement for National Liberation (MLN).

The guerrilla's actions - kidnaps of diplomats, bank raids, arms thefts, ridiculed the government and the police. A process of escalation began, as the police force brought in torture methods from Brazil and was reorganised into a more "efficient" unit. Torture of guerrillas led to more violent clashes between them and the security forces (they had initially proclaimed their wish not to kill policemen, but this strategy was dropped after tortures began).

The guerrillas were only one of the many groups on the left, but the powers of arbitrary imprisonment and questioning, and torture, were applied against all dissidents, from students to trade unionists. With the approach of elections in 1971, Pacheco began manoeuvres to continue in office. After narrowly defeating an attempt to impeach him in Congress, he reflatd the economy in the pre elections period, and inflation promptly began to accelerate again. His policies has suppressed the symptons, but not the causes.

4. The 1971 Elections. Three main parties contested the elections. Pacheco Areco stood as one of the Colorado candidates. His candidature depended on the voting of a constitutional amendment allowing presidential reelection. The attempt failed. Juan María Bordaberry stood as the "next best" candidate from the government's point of view. Various other "traditional" politicians presented their candidature under the Colorado umbrella.

Two developments indicated that the need for change was felt. Firstly, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate emerged as a Blanco candidate committed to reform, specifically denying the validity of the monetarist response to the crisis and promising land reform. Secondly, a left wing coalition, the Frente Amplio, was organised - initially called by the Christian Democrat Party - presenting a single candidate committed to major changes and calling for political amnesty.

In what has been described as the most "dirty" elections ever held in Uruguay, Bordaberry emerged as the victor. The results were not announced for three months, following numerous recounts. With 22 per cent of the votes in his favour, Bordaberry was less popular than Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, but

the Colorados as a whole had a minute margin (12,500 votes out of 1.6 million votes cast) over the Blancos, and that made Bordaberry president-elect. Experienced observers have produced well documented evidence of electoral fraud, and assert that the rightful victor at the polls was Wilson Ferreira Aldunate. The Frente Amplio obtained 18 per cent of the vote, the best performance of the left Uruguayan history. By historical standards the poll was a clear indication that the electorate wanted change.

5. Military Intervention In April 1972 the 45 trained military forces, now brought into the anti-guerrilla struggle, dealt a series of crucial blows to the Tupamaros. Most of their military and political organisation was mopped up or neutralised in the following months.

In February 1973 the generals presented Bordaberry with an ultimatum. On the surface the main issue was massive corruption within the government. Some sectors on the left were encouraged by the 16 point programme the Generals suggested, as it included land reform, an end to the corruption of the traditional parties, and a refusal by the army to be used by the government to suppress trade unions. Bordaberry was forced to accept the formation of a cabinet level "council of national security".

In June of 1973, the armed forces allied with Bordaberry and announced the closing down of Congress, illegalisation of the Workers' National Confederation (CNT), illegalisation of political parties and establishment of close government censorship. Both the army and Bordaberry wanted to get at a group of senators and deputies who had been too prominent in their denunciations of torture and corruption. The "progressive" points of the February document were forgotten.

The last major oppositional force, the workers, were defeated in the months following the "slow Coup". A general strike was called, lasting 15 days under the most difficult conditions: mass arrests, tortures and military operations against occupied factories.

The universities were intervened, and a major "mopping up" operation begun. The new regime set about dismantling the remnants of Uruguay's most famous educational, cultural and political institutions.

6. The Political System After the Coup Following three years of dictatorial rule, the military have still not completely formalised their new political system. There are, however, two key bodies. The Council of State is composed of 25 civilians sympathetic to the government, and was originally conceived of as a replacement for Congress. In theory its members are appointed by the President, but in practice this is under strict military supervision. The Council of the Nation is a new body formed after the military disagreed with Bordaberry over the constitutional future of the country last June and removed him. It is made up of the Council of State and the 21 highest ranking officers in the armed forces. It has chosen Aparicio Méndez as next president from 1st September. Observers consider he is little more than a puppet.

7. The Economy after the Coup The oil crisis in 1974 hit Uruguay particularly badly, as the country is completely dependent on imported oil. Although a complete assessment cannot be made here, the following facts are of interest:

- the percentage of the budget taken by the security forces has increased from 8.6 per cent in 1967 to 50 per cent in 1975.
- the economic strategy is completely geared to the traditional export sector, at a time when, according to the IMF, Uruguay's terms of trade continue to worsen.
- the trade balance deficit was 104 million dollars in 1974, 170 million in 1975 and is forecast at 260 millions for this year.
- With inflation still high, real wages continue the fall begun in 1968.

The armed forces have simply continued to pursue the policies begun by Pacheco in 1968. A logical aspect of their continued application after the 1971 elections has been the suppression of democracy in the country.

B: Uruguay: Facts and figures

AREA: 72.172 square miles

PERSONS per square mile: 37

POPULATION:

- in 1963: 2.595.510

- in 1975: 2.763.964

-According to UN projections, it should have been: 3.500.000.

Of the 700.000 - or more - Uruguayans thus "missing", around 500.000 are in Argentina, 10.000 in Australia, and many hundreds in Spain, Sweden, Italy, France, Switzerland, Cuba, Venezuela, México, etc. They have voted with their feet, particularly since 1972.

CAPITAL: Montevideo, on the River Plate.

POPULATION: 1.202.757, in 1963

1.229748, in 1975

ACTIVE POPULATION IN 1969:

Services: 51,7%

Industries: 31,7%

Agriculture: 16,6%

10% of the population is over 65 years old.

(Average in Latin America: 4%)

URBAN POPULATION: 86%

PRODUCTIVE LAND: 88,8% (average in Latin America: 24%)

INFLATION: Second only to Chile, the world champion

85% p.a. in 1965

49,5% 1966

139,9% 1967

66,3 % 1968

14,5 % 1969

20,9 % 1970

185 % 1972

107 % 1974

97,5 % 1975

DEVALUATIONS: (49, since March 1972)

US\$ 1.00	- 1	Urug. peso, in 1928
	2	" " " 1953
	11	" " " 1959
	250	" " " 1967
	859	" " " 1972
	2.700	" " " 1975

"The economy has been totally stagnant between 1969 and 1974"  
"The rate of increase of investment is practically zero, between 1959 and 1974"

"Rents rose 30% in 1975. Medicaments, between 60 and 80%"  
"Real wages: In 1976, 48% lower than in 1968"

EXTERNAL DEBTS: 31.3.76 US\$ 1,158,600.000  
(US \$ 558,600.000 end of 1966)

EXPORTS 1975 : US\$ 380,000.000

IMPORTS 1975 : US\$ 550,000.000

TRADE DEFICIT 1975: US\$ 170,000.000

UNEMPLOYMENT : 10%

REPRESSION AND TORTURE

In order to crush/suppress/silence/popular unrest and revolutionary activities, Uruguay (formerly "the Switzerland of America", today "The Ireland of 1845-1850") needs:

- The highest military expenditure in Latin America: 3,1% of the GNP. Over 55% of the national budget for the Armed Forces.
- The highest US military aid, loans and assistance in Latin America.
- To be No.1 in the ranking of military expenditure, although it is the smallest of the Latin American countries.
- A world record of political prisoners per capita: A permanent stock of 5.000 to 8.000.
- To become one of the 5 worst offenders against Human Rights in Latin America together with Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Guatemala.
- To systematise the use of torture, applying scientific or savage methods: For example, 29 deaths under torture have been documented by international organisations, 25 different torture methods at least, are well recorded, 1 Uruguayan in 70 has been tortured.
- To close down 38 papers, all of the opposition press.
- To dismember 257.000 families through imprisonment, exile, bombing and murders.
- To adopt a strategy known as "Plan Mercury". This is similar to the CIA funded "Operation Phoenix" in South Vietnam, under which the political activities of 12 million people were investigated, 153.000 were arrested in one year and 20.587 activists were murdered (Sources: Mr. Colby-CIA, Us. Congress, NACLA Reports). Scores of Uruguayan refugees in Argentina are now being round-up, kidnapped, tortured and murdered under "Operation Mercury". Among them, Union leaders, journalists and professors, two Uruguayan Senators (from the Conservative-Liberal sectors), the daughter of a former Uruguayan Ambassador in London, Paris and Bonn and a 20-days old baby, the youngest political prisoner in the world.
- To become a "naked dictatorship, an efficient, cruel and barbaric totalitarianism" as defined by Prof. Martin Weinstein (Department of Political Science, Paterson State College. Author of a book: "Uruguay: The politics of Failure" in his Statement to the House of Representatives, hearings on Human Rights in Uruguay, Washington 27.7.76.



For its violation of Human Rights and extreme methods of popular repression, Uruguay has been warned/criticized/singled out/investigated/denounced by: The European Parliament, the UN Commission on Apartheid (South Africa is backing the Uruguay dictatorship), the Venezuelan Senate, the US House of Representatives, all leading European Commissions of Jurists and Federations or Ligues for Human Rights, World Council of Churches, International Mouvements and Federations of Students, Professionals and Intellectuals, etc, etc.

The International Red Cross denied in Geneva, 16.7.76, that they have "praised the Uruguayan prisons", as stated by the State-controlled, State-censored press of Uruguay.

Amnesty International recently launched a world-wide campaign which has collected 348.000 signatures in 70 countries calling for an international commission of enquiries to investigate the use of torture in Uruguay.

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