

AS I SEE IT

Uruguay jails presidential hopeful without an angry word from U.S.

By JOSEPH ELDRIDGE
For Scripps-Howard News Service

WASHINGTON — The recent arrests of Uruguayan presidential candidate Wilson Ferreira Aldunate and his son Juan Raul cast a dark shadow over that country's upcoming elections and return to democracy.

Uruguay is a small country of nearly 3 million people lodged between Argentina and Brazil, two of South America's largest and most influential countries. Presidential elections, scheduled for November, are expected to return constitutional rule to Uruguay after a brutal 11-year military interlude.

On June 16, after more than a decade in exile, the Ferreris, accompanied by hundreds of friends and family members, embarked from Buenos Aires for Montevideo. Despite threats of retaliation from the Uruguayan government, tens of thousands of supporters gathered at the port, eagerly awaiting their return. Before they could set foot on Uruguay soil, however, the Ferreris were arrested and unceremoniously thrown in separate military jails.

FOR YEARS, Uruguay held the dubious distinction of having the highest percentage of political prisoners of any country in the world. Torture is common practice (in April, Vladimir Roslik was tortured to death). The generals have banned trade unions and political parties. Newspapers, television and radio are severely censored. Government permission is required for any meeting of more than two persons.

Wilson Ferreira was also a presidential candidate in 1972, and he ran an enormously popular campaign. In fact, he received more votes than any other individual, but lost the election because the competing Colorado Party garnered more total votes than his Blanco Party.

Forced out of his country after the 1973 military coup, he sought asylum in Argentina. Two years later, Uruguayan paramilitary hit squads assassinated Zelmar Michelini and Hector Gutierrez Ruiz, two prominent Uruguayan politicians exiled in Argentina. Wilson barely escaped the same fate by hastily seeking refuge in the Austrian Embassy.

Death threats forced the Ferreris to come to Washington, where Wilson was immediately invited to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the situation in Uruguay. This appearance before the

U.S. Congress constitutes one of the more serious charges currently leveled at Wilson by the military. The others include "subversive association" and "attacking the morality of the armed forces."

WHILE STILL in exile, Wilson was nominated earlier this year by the Blanco Party as their presidential candidate. Because of his outspoken criticism of the military government and his fervent devotion to democratic principles, Wilson has come to personify resistance to the extremely unpopular dictatorship.

Within Uruguay pressure is building for change. Fear of reprisal is no longer sufficient to keep individuals from every sector of Uruguayan society from publicly declaring their opposition to the military government. Last month, a general strike paralyzed the entire country for 24 hours.

In sharp contrast with this public scorn is the guarded silence of the Reagan administration. By failing to declare its consternation over the arrests, the United States risks identifying itself once more with the forces of repression in Latin America.

In Central America, Reagan's administration mines harbors, supports counterrevolutionary wars, and finances elections, all in the name of democracy. In Uruguay, this same administration has not only failed to demonstrate enthusiastic support for unencumbered elections, but has also expressed some irritation at the Ferreris for putting the military on the spot by returning. In its only public statement, the administration accepts the legality of Uruguay's military tribunals and expresses its "hope that this incident does not jeopardize" the return to civilian government.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S response to the current crisis in Uruguay once again illustrates the double standard inherent in U.S. policy toward the nations of Latin America. While the administration vociferously condemns, and at times attempts to destabilize, "unfriendly" governments which may restrict democratic freedoms, it remains disturbingly silent in the face of atrocities committed by "friendly" regimes. If the Reagan administration is sincerely committed to democracy throughout Latin America, it must not base its human rights policies on ideological grounds.

Ultimately, the fate of Wilson Ferreira will be decided by a political, not a legal, process. Based on the military's own anti-terrorist codes, the arrests were arbitrary, politically motivated and serve to ridicule, rather than uphold, "due process of law." Wilson is currently the most popular politician in the country and a presidential candidate for a major political party. Unless Wilson is released, Uruguay is unlikely to restore meaningful democratic procedures peacefully.

Wilson Ferreira and many other patriotic Uruguayans have risked their lives to bring about an end to dictatorship and a transition to constitutional government. They need the strong support of the world's most powerful democracy, the United States, and they need it now.

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