

Former Guerrillas Head Uruguayan Congress

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Two former guerrillas who fought the Uruguayan government in the seventies were sworn in on Tuesday to head the two houses of Congress.

Mr. Jose Mujica, a Tupamaro rebel leader who spent seven years imprisoned in a deep well during Uruguay's 1973-84 military rule, wept as he was sworn in to chair the Senate.

Mrs. Nora Castro, a Tupamaro guerrilla also imprisoned by the military, became the first woman to preside over the Chamber of Deputies in Uruguay's history.

Both renounced using violence for political ends two decades ago and joined the center-left coalition which for the last ten years has been headed by Socialist Tabare Vazquez, who will become Uruguay's first leftist president on March 1. The Broad Front won a landslide victory in last October presidential and congressional elections.

"This is a historic moment that no one thought would ever happen," fellow senator and Tupamaro member Eleuterio Fernandez Huidobro told reporters.

The Tupamaros were crushed by the (1973) military dictatorship after a string of bloody attacks on the military and police forces, the murder of a CIA agent and kidnapping of several diplomats including British Ambassador Geoffrey Jackson in 1971.

Mujica, 70 who was the most voted senator will stay on in the Senate until he becomes Agriculture Minister in the new government next March 1.

Mr. Vazquez's Broad Front coalition has majorities in both houses (52/99 and 17/30), a situation which did not occur in Uruguayan politics for the last four decades. Uruguay's traditional or historical parties (going back to 1830), the Blancos and the Colorados, will both be in opposition for the first time in history.

Uruguay thus joins the leftist current running through most of South America, the result of voters' rejection to decades of U.S.-backed market reforms that often ended in crisis. In 2002/03 as a consequence of the collapse of neighboring Argentina's economy and subsequent financial panic, Uruguay suffered one of the deepest banking crisis in history, suffering a 20% GDP contraction, but was finally rescued with a 1,5 billion US dollars bridge loan from the US Treasury Department.

Most of the region's left-leaning leaders, including Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and possibly Cuba's Fidel Castro, are expected in Montevideo for the March 1 inauguration. Within the Broad Front coalition, the largest force is the Popular Participation Movement, led by "Pepe" Mujica, 70 and Fernandez Huidobro. In the sixties and early seventies they took up arms as leaders of the leftwing urban guerrilla group, Tupamaros which overwhelmed the political system and poorly armed police forces opening the way for eleven years of military dictatorship.

In 1983/84 with the return of democracy under the leadership of elected Colorado president Julio Maria Sanguinetti the Tupamaros were granted a general amnesty and rapidly incorporated to civilian life and politics.

Another touching moment for the former guerrilla leader was when as president of the General Assembly he performed the ceremonial review of the Florida Guard responsible for the custody of Congress, the same military battalion which imprisoned him in the seventies.

"Today's events confirm the complete pacification of the country after decades of violence and turmoil, and later twenty years of peaceful coexistence under constitutional rule", said elected Senator and former President Sanguinetti.

However Senator Fernandez Huidobro described the situation rather differently, "This is just one stage more in our permanent struggle for the Uruguayan people, who began decades ago".

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