

Uruguay in Haiti: The Poorest President of a Mercenary Army?

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“Uruguayans participate with 13% to 15% of our armed forces in peace missions. For years and years, we have always accepted the places assigned to us. But however you decide and allocate resources, do not consider us to be there just to serve coffee.” Uruguayan President José Mujica, United Nations General Assembly, Sep, 25, 2013.

Ten years ago, a leftist party came to power for the first time in Uruguay, the Frente Amplio (Broad Front). Five years ago, the party won again, and it has recently won for the third time. In all three elections, the Frente Amplio (FA) won an absolute parliamentary majority. José Mujica (“Pepe”), the president elected five years ago, is stepping down to make way for his FA successor, Tabaré Vázquez.

Mujica has been termed, “the poorest president in the world.” He drives a 1967 Volkswagon Beetle, is a former guerrilla and was a political prisoner of the civilian/military dictatorships that ruled Uruguay from 1973 to 1985. His outgoing government has legalized marijuana, abortion rights and gay marriage and has welcomed refugees from Syria as well as six foreign prisoners from the US gulag in Guantanamo, Cuba.

Mujica donates his salary to a voluntary plan for housing construction by a militant labor association of workers. The Serbian filmmaker Emir Kusturica is making a film about him titled The Last Hero. But there is another side.



Outgoing Uruguayan President José Mujica with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in Montevideo in June 2011.

Uruguay and the phenomenon of UN military missions

For 10 years, Uruguay has maintained troops in Haiti as part of the United Nations police and military occupation force known as MINUSTAH (1). Uruguay not only participates in

MINUSTAH, it is the second-largest component of the force, by numbers, after Brazil. Latin American countries are a key pillar of this occupation, contributing about half of its foot soldiers. The Latin American participants in MINUSTAH contribute an average of 10 soldiers per one million inhabitants. But at the peak of its participation, Uruguay, a country of 3.4 million, had 330 soldiers per million of its population!

UN “peacekeeping missions” are becoming ever more clearly the “colonialist screen” that was denounced long ago by Patricio Lumumba, the first, post-colonial leader of Congo. He was assassinated in January 1961, only eight months after being elected prime minister of that country of fabulous natural wealth.

These missions are not neutral forces. They typically support one side against another in times of political and social conflict with imperialism or its local representatives. This was the case in Congo in 1960-61 and it is the case today in Haiti and more recently in Mali. Their function is not “peace” but, rather, to maintain imperial order in points of disturbance on the global, capitalist periphery.

“Peacekeeping” missions of the UN Security Council have a twofold function. One, they are shrouded in the legitimacy of the UN name, and they assist the imperialist powers from becoming overextended in their military efforts to maintain their world order. They also confer a seeming legality to the maintenance of an imperialist order of permanent war. The United States is the prime beneficiary of this service.

Haiti is a special case. There was no armed conflict there in 2004, when MINUSTAH was established (in June of that year). There has been no armed conflict for the 10-plus years of MINUSTAH’s presence. But the “possibility” of violence is used as a convenient pretext for intervention and containment by military means against an eminently political and social conflict.

This aspect of Uruguayan foreign policy – enthusiastic participation in foreign military adventures – requires some explanation.

On the one hand, in common with other leftist Latin American governments participating in MINUSTAH, the government in Uruguay has not broken with imperialism. It and other soft-left governments in Latin America today, including Brazil and Argentina, are still beholden to capitalism. One expression of this is their participation in the occupation of Haiti.

>Even Bolivia and Ecuador have participated in MINUSTAH, although with smaller forces compared to others. Ecuador has recently withdrawn from the force, but its military base in Haiti was transferred to the authoritarian government of Haitian President Michel Martelly, and in 2013, Ecuador provided training to some 40 Haitian paramilitaries, whom Haitians fear will form the nucleus of a revived Haitian army. The reviled, human rights-violating former army was disbanded in 1995 by the pacifist president of the day, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay have played major roles in MINUSTAH. Chile joined with the United States, Canada and France in landing troops in March 2004 to consolidate the violent overthrow of Aristide, then serving his second, elected term as president. Brazil uses these missions to train its troops in military control of its civilian population. For several years, the Brazilian army has militarily occupied the favelas (poor districts) of Rio de Janeiro. The World Cup tournament of 2014 prompted the extension of that occupation to other cities in Brazil.

This contrasts with the attitude of Cuba and Venezuela, which have no military presence in Haiti but, instead, have provided very substantial humanitarian assistance, before and after the devastating earthquake in 2010. Cuba has extensive medical brigades in Haiti and has also assisted with agriculture, fishing and road construction. Venezuela has also assisted with construction and is a key energy supplier. These two countries operate without military support from MINUSTAH, thus refuting the claims of other foreign governments, particularly those of Europe and North America, that armed protection from the Haitian people is required for large aid efforts.



Uruguayan UN soldiers during an awards ceremony in Aux Cayes in August 2011. The business of praetorian guards means serving dictatorships, of course since democratic and popular regimes do not require such a service.

Why Uruguay?

The Mujica period in Uruguay has been characterized by a deepening of the capitalist, extractive economic model and a continual search for foreign, direct investment. The accompanying, mercenary foreign policy is not new. What is new, for several decades now, is the degree to which the military institution and its wishes shape that foreign policy.

For geographic and historical reasons, the Uruguayan bourgeoisie is weaker than others in the region. It has always been drawn toward close ties with whatever empire is dominant. That is an historical constant.

In an earlier era, Uruguay exported agricultural products needed by English industry. But in the Yankee era, the United States does not need or desire such products. Increasingly, Uruguay has resorted to the export of “political goods” that can assist “democratic colonialism.” That is today’s “Product of Uruguay” commercial stamp.

To understand further the new militaristic aspect of Uruguayan foreign policy, it is necessary to understand the historical role of the military in this country.

Uruguay is a small country without great resources. It is surrounded by much larger, friendly countries. Its only borders are with Argentina and Brazil. It has no national conflict hypothesis, no history of wars and no need for armed forces for territorial defense. In any event, armed forces would be useless in the case of real war with its much larger neighbors.

But this small country, pacifist and without enemies, is one of the most militarized in Latin America. Its army counts eight soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants, triple the proportions of Argentina and Brazil.

The bloated and useless army has played a vital role historically in intimidating and

detering social rebellion, despite seeming to be much more passive than elsewhere on the continent. The system of social domination in Uruguay cannot run without the army. This is the counterpoint to democratic political rule in Uruguay – what is termed the “buffer society.” (2) But the cost of the armed forces is a heavy burden on the government’s budget. As armaments become outmoded, it is very costly to modernize them. Participation in “peacekeeping” abroad is a way to share these costs with the imperialist world system, by providing a mercenary police service as a commodity. It also promotes an international image of a country committed to world peace, all the while obtaining direct financial benefits and indirect political ones from militarism.

The full scale (and cost) of Uruguay’s overseas missions includes the soldiers who are serving, those preparing to replace them, and returnees who are in recovery. To this must also be added the permanent staff of logistics services and again, their replacement and recovery. Fully 40 percent of the armed force is thus engaged at any one time. Ninety percent of Uruguay’s armed forces have passed through a foreign mission at some time.

Uruguay has outsourced its armed forces to the point where they would not be present for the country should a real war arise.

The country depends on its foreign roles even to pay the salaries of its soldiers. It receives \$50 million per year for the missions in which it participates, including \$18 million for Haiti. Eleven million of that pays for salaries; the remainder is supposed to pay for ammunition and equipment maintenance. It’s an inexpensive army, but the costs of maintaining it are inflated by corruption in the spending of its resources. In one renowned case, it cost more to sail two naval vessels to Haiti than the cost of the vessels themselves. There have been several prosecutions of military officials, but the exact degree of corruption and diversion of funds by officials is difficult to quantify.

Uruguay must purchase its own weapons and equipment. The UN pays for the maintenance of equipment during its time in operation. The remainder of the revenue Uruguay earns is used by the Ministry of Defense, whose budget is about \$300 million. A Uruguayan soldier earns \$400 per month; if he goes abroad on a mission, he earns a total of \$1,000 thanks to the stipend paid by the UN. The financial incentive for soldiers to volunteer abroad is thus very considerable. An added incentive is the right to travel to Europe or North America on UN-issued visas.

Military officers, who already earn very high salaries, pensions and additional funds, also boost their salaries when they go on missions. They are already an inflated, upper segment of an inflated army.

It is shameful to hear arguments that have been made by Frente Amplio parliamentarians or senators that participation by Uruguayan soldiers in UN missions allows the soldiers to then buy a small house. Or worse, they argue that missions provide opportunities in actual combat, conveniently overlooking who it is (i.e. local populations) that are killed or injured by such “opportunities.”

Haiti threatens a good thing

This comfortable business in foreign military missions has always been challenged by the MINUSTAH mission in Haiti for a host of reasons:

- The Haitian people have consistently rejected foreign occupation of their

country.

- The government of President Martelly is increasingly taking shape as a dictatorship.
- The Uruguayan social organizations, including the national trade union center, have always demanded complete and immediate withdrawal of Uruguayan troops from Haiti. Each year, Parliament must approve the extension of Uruguay's participation in MINUSTAH (the Security Council itself must approve the mission in a vote each year). In these annual votes, the Frente Amplio has imposed a military discipline on its parliamentary bloc (the notorious, "hand in a cast" votes). (3) This has led to the resignation of three FA deputies in the recent period, who refused out of principle, to vote for keeping troops in Haiti. This is the only issue in the FA over which internal differences have come to such a point. (4)
- On top of all this, Uruguayan forces in Haiti have displayed the worst forms of conduct. There has been corruption in military purchases and ineptitude of military aviators, causing a crash with fatal consequences (the ministry of defense falsified the record of flying hours of pilots serving in Haiti to have their credentials accepted by the UN). The whole world viewed on the internet the scandalous images of Uruguayan soldiers anally raping a young Haitian at a Uruguayan naval base in Haiti. That has turned out to be the lasting image of Uruguay in Haiti.

Faced with all these difficulties, the Mujica government is attempting an intermediate solution. It is conducting a gradual withdrawal, in stages, already completed in part. From its peak of 1,100 soldiers, the number is now 240. To deal with the increasingly embarrassing evidence of the authoritarian drift of the government of Martelly, Uruguay is joining with other foreign powers to pressure Martelly into an agreement with the political opposition in Haiti for the holding of elections to the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. The electoral mandates of deputies and senators have expired, and Martelly threatens to rule by decree.

Uruguayan Foreign Minister Luis Almagro has virtually extorted Martelly with the threat of immediate withdrawal of the Uruguayan troops if the political deadlock is not solved, a rather unusual diplomatic style for a small country, to say the least. Meanwhile, President Mujica has stated emphatically that Uruguay "will not be a praetorian guard of a dictatorship."

Uruguayans who are truly anti-colonialist do not agree with any "imposition of liberty" on Haiti from abroad. They are demanding unconditional and unilateral withdrawal of troops. But even if we treat the gestures of Mujica and Almagro as signs of good intention, these have failed. Why? Because Martelly does not govern Haiti.

Martelly and his government are nothing more than Yankee puppets. What's more, they have lost control of the situation. They no longer have anything to offer to Haitians short of Martelly's resignation. This is what the Haitian people are now demanding in street protests and in other forms of struggle, day after day.

Prospects for Haiti, for MINUSTAH, and for Uruguay's role

So what is happening in Haiti? There is no agreement between the government and the political opposition. The Parliament [Senate] is no longer functional because there have been no elections as the mandates of senators and deputies expired. Martelly's government

now rules by decree as [is] a dictatorship; the people are demanding his resignation as well as the departure of foreign occupation troops. Popular mobilizations are growing.

In Uruguay, Mujica's government now faces a very big dilemma: to act as a praetorian guard of a dictatorship, or use the law approved by Parliament in December (proposed by Mujica himself) which contains the option of a complete withdrawal of the troops.

Mujica's government will end at end of February. His successor Tabaré Vázquez, also FA, will return to the presidency, having served from 2005-10. He wants a political rapprochement with the United States. The situation in Haiti has provoked internal tension and debate in the government.

There is still no Uruguayan decision on withdrawal from Haiti. The government is "watching" to see if a dictatorship becomes installed in Haiti or whether this can be averted. Defense Minister Fernandez Huidobro defends the position of keeping the troops. Like Mujica, he is a former guerrilla of the Tupamaros movement. But in the early 1970s, after he was captured and imprisoned and while the Tupamaros were still operating under the command of its legendary founder Raul Sendic, Huidobro began negotiations with the military. He said he wanted the military government to adopt a "nationalist agenda" and accord better treatment of prisoners. In exchange, he would advocate that the guerillas give up their arms. No accord materialized, and Huidobro's efforts served to camouflage the ongoing military dictatorship. Today, Huidobro is a strong supporter of maintaining the status quo with the military, including leaving its privileges untouched and not to lift the impunity it was granted for the crimes of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. There are only a half dozen military officials who were convicted for past crimes, and they are residing in a luxurious "VIP prison" built with funds remaining from overseas "missions." Huidobro (and also Mujica) wants them freed in deference to their advanced age.

There are at least 400 military personnel implicated in past torture and murders who remain unpunished. Unlike the luxurious conditions of genocidal military officers, overcrowding of common prisoners in Uruguay's prisons is a serious problem that has been reported by the UN's special rapporteur against torture.

Huidobro has just been through a bruising controversy with human rights organizations who accuse him of obstruction of justice by not providing information files. A recent report of the International Commission of Jurists (an office of the UN) says the same.

Huidobro's argument in favor of MINUSTAH is that it is preferable to have an "anti-imperialist intervention" instead of a "Yankee invasion." When the 2010 earthquake happened, 10,000 additional US soldiers, including 2,000 marines, entered Haiti unilaterally. Within days of the 2010 earthquake, 20,000 US troops were amassed in Haiti. The "anti-imperialist" MINUSTAH did nothing to stop that, of course. MINUSTAH's own forces swelled from 9,000 to 12,000.

The Uruguayan army has a keen interest in keeping the money earned from foreign missions flowing. The challenge facing the government in a withdrawal from Haiti is to first get a pledge from the UN for "new work for the guys."

Uruguay has just received the support of the countries of Latin America for one of the 10, nonpermanent, rotating seats on the Security Council. Foreign Minister Almgro is a strong candidate for a posting as General Secretary of the Organization of American States. What

policies will Uruguay pursue though in these institutions? Will the country vote for an end to the occupation of Haiti and for the UN to take responsibility for the damage of cholera that it brought to the country? Or will it be there “just to serve coffee” while others make the decisions?

The business of praetorian guards requires customers to be successful. That means serving dictatorships, of course. Democratic and popular regimes, on the other hand, do not require such a service. It’s not only in Haiti that “peacekeeping” serves the worst national and social interests. It’s also in Uruguay.

As Frederick Engels once wrote, “A people which oppresses another cannot emancipate itself.”

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Fernando Moyano is a Marxist political activist in Uruguay and a longtime writer and editor in left-wing media in Latin America media, including the journal of Marxist theory Alfaguara. He began his political activity in the late 1960s in the Proletarian Socialist Unification Movement, a detachment of the Socialist Party. He joined other political organizations, including the Popular Participation Movement, led today by outgoing Uruguayan President José Mujica. He was a founder of the Coordination of Social Organisations for Withdrawal of Troops in Haiti and a member of the Uruguay Free of Strip Mining movement.

Notes

1. MINUSTAH is the French acronym for “United Nations International Mission for Stability in Haiti.”

2. The “buffer society” is a term coined by Carlos Real Azúa (1916-1977), a lawyer, professor of literature and aesthetics, literary critic, historian and essayist. He is considered the foremost pioneer of political science in Uruguay. His term is a metaphor for Uruguay and its people in which social and political changes do not explode; they are contained by social commitments and nonviolent forms of domination.

3. The “hand in a cast” (mano de yeso) is a metaphor used in Uruguay to refer to a party imposing a rigid discipline on its parliamentary deputies in voting on matters deemed vital to the interests of the party hierarchy.

4. When MINUSTAH was created in June 2004 and Uruguay joined in, the Frente Amplio was in opposition and voted against it. One of those MPs who was emphatic in rejecting the mission was current defense minister, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro. A year later, the FA was in government, and it voted to continue Uruguay’s participation. A veteran socialist deputy and leading figure on the political left in Uruguay, Guillermo Chifflet, refused to vote in favor and gave up his seat. In the following years, no one challenged the party discipline. But in 2012, another deputy, Esteban Pérez, like Mujica a former guerrilla and political prisoner of the military dictatorship, refused to vote in favor during the annual vote to extend participation, and he was forced to leave the FA. Last December, a third rebel deputy, Luis Puig, came out in opposition. He is a leader of a small political organization affiliated to the FA with deep roots in the labor movement.

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