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Communism and Democracy during the Latin American Cold War: The Case of the Uruguayan Communist Party in the 60's

Comunismo y democracia en la Guerra Fría Latinoamericana: el caso de PC de Uruguay en los sesentas

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English version: Lucía Yaffé and Emiliano Yaffé

RESUMEN

Este trabajo examina el desarrollo del Partido Comunista Uruguayo (PCU) durante los años sesenta del siglo pasado como un partido pro-soviético ligeramente heterodoxo. En el período más álgido de la Guerra Fría en América Latina, desde la crisis de los misiles de 1962 hasta la deposición del presidente Salvador Allende en 1973, el PCU jugó un papel internacional relativamente importante, considerando su pequeño tamaño. En un tiempo de difíciles relaciones entre cubanos y soviéticos, Rodney Arismendi, su líder principal entre 1955 y 1989, operó como un hombre fiable para ambos lados. Probablemente fue por eso que pudo actuar ocasionalmente como intermediario entre La Habana y Moscú. Al nivel nacional el PCU fue uno de los defensores más vehementes de la revolución cubana y el más enfático crítico de la aplicación mecánica de su es-

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of the Uruguayan Communist Party during the Sixties as a slightly heterodox pro-soviet Latin American party. In the most aligid period of the Cold War in Latin America, from the missiles crisis of 1962 to the deposition of President Salvador Allende in 1973, the PCU played an important role for the international Communist movement, considering its small dimension. In a time of difficult relations between Cubans and Soviets, Rodney Arismendi – its main leader from 1955 to 1989, became a reliable man for both sides. Probably because of that he could act as an intermediary between La Habana and Moscow. At the domestic level the PCU was one of the most vehement defenders of the Cuban Revolution and the most emphatic critic of the

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trategia en Uruguay. En esos momentos, no era fácil combinar la preferencia soviética por el camino pacífico hacia el socialismo con la incendiaria retórica revolucionaria cubana. Este artículo analiza los fundamentos y la forma en que los comunistas uruguayos sostuvieron esta ambigua posición, centrándose en la manera en la que trataron de combinar democracia y revolución.

Palabras clave: Partido Comunista; Uruguay; Guerra Fría Latinoamericana; lealtad democrática.

mechanic application of its strategy to Uruguay. In such times, it was not so simple to combine the Soviet preference for the pacific road to socialism with the Cuban revolutionary rhetoric. This paper analyzes the foundations and the way in which the Uruguayan communists deal with this ambiguous position, focusing on how they tried to combine Democracy and Revolution.

Keywords: Communist Party; Uruguay; Latin American Cold War; democratic loyalty.

The Communist Party of Uruguay (*Partido Comunista del Uruguay*, PCU) represents an interesting case to analyze the relationships between communism and democracy in the context of the Latin American Cold War. In this work we focus on one particular aspect of that relationship: the link between political ideology and democratic loyalty.¹ As with the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista de Uruguay*, PSU) during that same period, the Marxist-Leninist ideology made the PCU take a critical stance on liberal democracy as a political regime.² However, Uruguayan Communists were more loyal toward democracy than Socialists.

While it was presented from the liberal Right as a threat to democracy, from the radical Left sectors the PCU was criticized for trusting in the possibilities of the existing political institutions, thereby creating false expectations. This crossfire regarding the path taken by the Communists in a context set by the widespread criticism to democracy reinforces the interest of the case.

The PCU was the most important leftist party in Uruguay during the decade previous to the establishment of the dictatorship in 1973. However, it has not been studied at length. Ten years ago it started to be the object of some academic works by Historians and Political Scientists. Silva (2009) made a characterization of the PCU between 1955 and 1973 centered on the cultural aspects of its political identity. De Giorgi (2011) proposed to understand it as a political sub-culture within the sixties' Left. Leibner (2011) produced a lengthy reconstruction of the PCU's itinerary between 1941 and 1973 centered in the notion of "social ideology". In his study of the 1968 mobilizations Markarian (2012) analyzes the epic and cultural components of the communist

political identity in relation to other left youth expressions. Finally, Garcé (2012) proposes an interpretation of the PCU's development centered on the importance of the "belief system" that set its "ideological matrix".

Beliefs, ideology, culture and identity are some of the main categories used in these investigations. The analytic perspective that we take in this work is different. We focus on the relationship between rational behavior and institutional frame. This approach assumes that behaviors not always derive directly and solely from actors' ideology. On contrary, they can also be a result of success or failure in the attempt to take advantage from opportunities and to overcome restrictions set up by institutions themselves.

In the mid-fifties, Communists and Socialists alike saw the imminence of a crisis of the current economic and social development model in Uruguay, as well as the lack of ability of the traditional parties to overcome it. In that frame both Marxist parties tried out very different paths to take advantage of the political opportunities they saw under such circumstances. The results were very different: while the PSU experienced a strong regression, the PCU obtained an important increase of its political and social influence.

Towards the end of the period the Communists could evaluate with satisfaction that for the first time in their history they had established themselves as a "real political force". Even though it continued to be a party with scarce electoral support, they had accomplished to amplify its influence setting up alliances and increasing their leading capacity in the labor union movement, which in those years turned into a very relevant actor. As a result, in the course of the sixties the PCU became the main political and social force within the Left, clearly surpassing the PSU, its historical Marxist rival. In this paper we try to show that it is in that relative success within the Left camp that resides one of the keys to explain the concern showed by the Communists in relation to democracy's stability between 1962 and 1973.

If we are right, it can be said that the case would sustain the hypothesis that, with relative independence from ideology, when political parties are successful in taking advantage of the opportunities the democratic regime provides, it is not beneficial for them to behave in a disloyal manner. Even in contexts of strong criticism to democracy, successful parties will have incentives to be loyal, moderating their political action as not to risk the stability of political institutions.

With those presumptions we analyze the case of the PCU during the sixties. In order to do so, we base on the review of the existing bibliography about the case and on the study of some party documents and publications, written

mainly by Rodney Arismendi, its most important leader from 1955-1989. We do a historical reconstruction that does not essentially differ from those already existing, in particular from the one produced by Leibner (2011), the most detailed and documented among the available studies on the PCU. The original contribution of this work relies on the analytical component of that reconstruction, from which derives a different interpretation of the PCU's relationship with liberal democracy in the sixties, based on a conceptual repertoire alternative to that used by the above mentioned Historians and Political Scientists.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section examines the influence that some international (especially Latin American) events had on the assertion and adjustment of the PCU's strategy elaborated during the second half of the fifties. The second section considers its implementation from 1962 onwards, as well as its results in the context of the social and political crisis leading to the breakdown of democracy in 1973. The final remarks summarize the main conclusions that arise from the historical analysis set in the preceding sections.

WAYS OF A CONTINENTAL LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

In the 1958 Programmatic Declaration (PCU, 1958) a key aspect of the strategic conception that would orientate Uruguayan communists' actions in the sixties was established. This referred to the continental dimension that the Latin American revolutionary process would have. As well as the socialist revolution could only be understood at a global scale, the revolution in each country would be part of a Latin American revolutionary process. In its first stage the revolution would have a democratic and national – anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist, character. This statement would be more deeply developed along the sixties, especially in the light of the Cuban experience, but that already figured as part of the 1958 program.

Communists followed the Latin American situation with attention. Every relevant milestone was analyzed from the perspective of its implications for the continental revolution and of its effects on the Uruguayan process at the same time. During the sixties the adjustments to the revolutionary conception and to the political strategy established in 1958 were produced as a result both of the local political evolution and of the Latin American events.

Particularly important were the lessons they extracted from three key events: the 1959 Cuban revolution, the 1964 Brazilian coup, and the 1970

electoral success of the Chilean Left. What is interesting here is not the analysis they conducted about each case in particular, but the learnings that were extracted from them for the Uruguayan process, the conclusion extracted in relation with their own political strategy, especially regarding the possibilities of walking the path of revolution within the frame of democratic political institutions.

The Cuban revolution generated the perception of a revolutionary imminecence in the continent. This perception was confirmed through another path at the end of the decade, when the Chilean Popular Unity (*Unidad Popular*, UP) triumphed in the electoral dispute for the national government, as a culmination of the unitary experience of the Left that went back to the fifties. From the PCU leaders' point of view, this events made the definitions about the character and the way of the revolution more urgent.

The Cuban process, which the PCU followed with sympathy from the beginning, would have a strong influence on the reaffirmation and adjustment of its strategic conception. It was as a consequence of its examination that the Uruguay communists developed the idea of the continental dimension of the Latin American revolution. Arismendi wrote at length about this issue in his 1962 book titled Problems of a continental revolution (*Problemas de una revolución continental*). Even though he evaluated positively the greater freedom of action with which the national CP's could act after the International Conferences of Communists and Workers Parties gathered (Moscow, 1957 and 1960), and though he recognized that each Latin American country had peculiarities that would give the national revolution in each of them a peculiar character, he did not consider that each CP could elaborate an exclusively national theory of the revolution. On contrary, such theory had to be conceived at a larger Latin American case (Leibner, 2011, p. 497). The acknowledgment of diversity could not imply the ignorance of the "essential unity of the Latin American revolution of our time", its unique and global character (Arismendi, 1962, pp. 21-22).

The Chinese-Soviet controversy was an instance of reaffirmation of the PCU's position regarding the topic of the paths of the revolution. This confrontation in the core of the international communist movement was stirred by the criticism from the Chinese CP on the Khrushchev-Kennedy agreement, which put an end to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. This initial episode derived into a more general criticism to the pacific coexistence and to the pacific path to socialism postulated by the Soviets and subscribed by the CP's international conferences above mentioned. In defense of the Soviet position, while he accused the Chinese

of playing to the enemy dividing the international communist movement by unacceptable methods and for spurious motives, Arismendi proclaimed the feasibility and desirability of the pacific transit to socialism. Anyway, he insisted that this did not imply ruling out the insurrectional path. Relying on the XVIII PCU Congress (June 1962) resolutions, he argued that in the face of the North American imperialism threat and the resistance that the dominant classes could present against the advances of the revolutionary forces, the working class and other popular sectors should prepare themselves to confront the enemy “in all terrain”. The revolutionaries should be trained “to think in one way of struggle or another”, and whatever the struggling way adopted according to the circumstances was, the important thing would be to have the support of “the popular masses” (Arismendi, 1963, p. 56).

Although the pro-Soviet alignment was confirmed during the controversy between the PCUS and the Chinese CP, the PCU evidenced some margin of autonomy in relation to the challenges that the Cuban process stated to the Latin American revolutionaries. Even though the PCU spread and defended the positions of the Popular Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Popular*, PSP, the name adopted by the Cuban CP 1944), the Uruguayans elaborated their own opinions about the Cuban revolution. These opinions were not always totally coincident with those of the PCUS, even though they never made these differences explicit. They openly differed with the critical positions on the Cuban experience stated by other Latin American CPs. They supported the revolutionary movement lead by Fidel Castro from the beginning. They never criticized publicly its postures and actions, even during moments of great tension between the Cuban leaders and other CPs in the region and with the PCUS itself, especially when the Cubans intensely practiced the policy of exportation of the revolution to the rest of the continent.

Shortly after the Soviet acceptance of the possibility of a pacific path to socialism that was endorsed in the PCU congress celebrated in 1958, the Cuban revolution had put the question of power and of the armed path in Left agenda as it had never before happened in Latin America. The PCU made an important effort of interpretation and elaboration in the context of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and of the guidelines coming from the USSR. Basically, this led to the confirmation of the positions approved in 1958: preference for the pacific path without ruling out any other possibility in case of an eventual blockade of such path by the dominant classes and the imperialism. The pacific way for the revolution was a possibility to be followed as deeply as possible. But it was not understood as an alternative option to the insurrectional path,

which was considered as more probable in spite of being less desirable (Leibner, 2011, p. 464).

After the military coup against the Brazilian president Joao Goulart in 1964 and considering the support provided by the USA to the dictatorship established from then on, the PCU confirmed that position as well as the forecast regarding the violent path as the most probable scenario for the revolution in Latin America. "The dangers have aggravated", warned Arismendi in a short article published two months after Goulart's overthrow (Arismendi, 1964). In the same text he called attention to the usual mistake to do generalizations in regards to the role of the Armed Forces. Even though he considered unlikely that the military would ally with the popular forces led by the working class, he stated that the existence of patriotic officials could not be denied. At the same time, he also warned about the risks of encouraging or trusting in any kind of military paternalism. The working class and other popular forces should have the initiative in the defense of democratic liberties. They should be prepared to defend them in any time by rapidly adopting the ways of struggle imposed by the enemy, and to move to the counteroffensive so that the defense of democracy threatened by the reactionary forces could even have a revolutionary outcome.

In Arismendi's opinion both things had failed in the Brazilian case. There was no military sector willing to oppose the coup. The people was not prepared to defend democracy in the way that was required by the circumstances. The Brazilian coup showed that, after the Cuban revolution and the failure to defeat it by a military invasion, the US policy to Latin America and the preference of the local dominant classes towards the authoritarian solutions left little room for the peaceful advance of the national and social liberation process. The US military invasion of the Dominican Republic in April 1965 confirmed and left no doubt about that. The message that the Uruguayan communist leader wanted to transmit to his comrades, though ambiguous in its content, was clear in its enunciation. All the legal existing spaces where the Left could peacefully act had to be used and preserved. But, at the same time the Left had to be prepared to fight by all means. The enemy would not hesitate to apply violence in order to stop the revolutionary process. Although in Uruguay the Left enjoyed the exceptional conditions offered by its democratic political institutions, the Brazilian lesson could not be ignored.

The PCU position was confirmed and adjusted in the midst of intense debates that were taking place within the Latin American Left. The relationship between democracy, violence and revolution was in the center of the debate

about the “paths of the revolution”. The existing positions in this regard were clearly established and confronted in the first conference of the Latin American Organization for Solidarity (*Organización Latinoamericana de Solidaridad*, OLAS) which took place in Havana in July-August 1967. The Cuban hosts promoted and achieved majoritarian support to approve a Final Declaration which stated that armed struggle would be the main way for the revolution in Latin America, leaving a secondary and subordinated role to the peaceful path. The pronouncement was compatible with the position assumed by the Uruguayan CP since 1955. But it collided with that of the Soviet Union that most Latin American CP’s followed, especially after the aforementioned controversy with the Chinese Communists.

The OLAS conference was the height of the confrontation between most of the Latin American CPs and the Cuban leadership. The situation became so extreme, that some of the most important CP’s of the continent (those of Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela) did not participate in the conference. On contrary, the Uruguayans, though not completely in agreement with their positions, supported the Cubans at all times, while trying to cushion the conflicts and to facilitate a restoration of the communist fraternity that had been lost. Arismendi’s good personal and political relationship both with the Cubans and with the Soviets allowed him to play a positive role in that sense.³ Not by chance did the Cuban hosts left the responsibility of organizing the Uruguayan delegation in hands of the Left Front for Liberation (*Frente Izquierda de Liberación*, FIDEL, a coalition founded by Communists and its allies in 1962), and was Arismendi assigned as one of four vice presidents of the conference (Rey Tristán, 2005).

The covert support to the guerrilla’s experiment made by Ernesto Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, provided at the same time that the arrangements for the OLAS conference and the meeting itself were being held, is a clear evidence of both political independence and strategic ambiguity. Not only did the PCU offered logistic support for the arrival of Guevara and some of the Cuban’s participants in the Bolivian guerrilla, but also provided combatants. In fact, they tried at first to involve the “Tupamaros” National Movement for Liberation (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, MLN). After failing in this attempt, they finally selected a group of volunteers among its own militants to join Che’s Bolivian guerrilla. Although they did not arrive to Bolivia because of Guevara’s fast and tragic end in October 1967, the episode remains as an evidence of the PCU position in relation with the possibilities of the pacific road to socialism in Latin America (Leibner, 2011, p. 505; Schwarz, 1997).

Throughout the next two years, when the cycle of social protest and State repression in Uruguay reached its peak, Arismendi produced a series of theoretical-political essays centered on the problem of the ways of the revolution in Latin America, based on a review of this issue in Lenin's thought. In 1970 these texts were reunited and published in a book titled *Lenin, the revolution and Latin America (Lenin, la revolución y América Latina)*. After an extensive development of Lenin's ideas he stated that the road of violence was opened "in the circumstance that the legal ways of struggle were closed" (Arismendi, 1970, p. 480). When they were in force, democracy and liberty were a desirable context for the development of the peaceful transition to socialism. But this perspective seemed unlikely in the vast majority of Latin American countries in the 1960s. These essays were produced and published at the moment when Chilean and Uruguayan Communists, amidst rumors of military coups and/or foreign invasions, were embarking themselves in leftist coalitions oriented to the peaceful way of revolution as a strategic alternative. Anyway, Arismendi was postulating that the armed insurrection would almost inexorably be the main way for the Latin American revolution. He also pointed out that the Uruguayan Communists were not only willing to practice all forms of struggle – provided that the political circumstances of the revolutionary process would require it and that the "mood of the masses" ensured the popular support, but that they also considered as their obligation to be prepared to use any method whenever it was required to do so (Arismendi, 1970, pp. 331-332).

Exactly two years after the execution of Che Guevara in Bolivia on October 9, 1969, the Chilean Communist and Socialist parties and other four Left organizations agreed to create the Popular Unity (Unidad Popular, UP). The UP candidate Salvador Allende conquered the Presidency next year, in September 1970. This happened when the decline of the 1960s Latin American guerrillas seemed to begin, but not in Uruguay where the Tupamaros enjoyed their moment of greatest expansion. The electoral triumph of the Chilean Left and the reforms carried out by Allende's government became a privileged object of analysis for the PCU.

Chile represented the first case in contemporary history in which the revolutionary left reached the government by a democratic election. This is why, in Arismendi's words, "the Chilean experience is of universal historical interest". It was particularly interesting for Uruguayans. In the same time when the PCU's strategy was strongly challenged by the Tupamaros guerrilla, the Chilean events offered the possibility to exemplify in concrete historical terms the feasibility of the "less painful road" to socialism, at least as a "way of

approximation” to the revolution. Arismendi observed in the historical period that went from the Cuban revolution to the electoral triumph of the Chilean UP, the configuration of a continental revolutionary situation (“Latin America has entered in a revolutionary process of general character”) and the diversification of the “ways of access” to the revolution (Arismendi, 1971, p. 30 and 25; Arismendi, 1973, p. 29 and 42).

THE NATIONAL CRISIS AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF THE COMMUNIST STRATEGY

As a party with an internationalist approach, the PCU was undoubtedly influenced by regional and world events. But the adjustments to the strategy which bases were established at the XVII Congress were also the result of the way in which they understood the national events. By 1958 the Communist leaders already visualized that the socio-economic model that had allowed important social advances in the post-war Uruguay had reached the limit of its possibilities. Likewise, they considered that the traditional political elites had exhausted their innovative capacity and were seriously committed to the interests of the oligarchic sectors that benefited from the prevailing socio-economic structure. In the perspective of what they anticipated as an inevitable economic crisis, and of the inability they observed in the ruling political elite, the structure of opportunities was changing in favor of the Left expectations.

If the Left took advantage of this opportunity, a substantial step to the beginning of a revolutionary process could happen. A change in the correlation of forces was needed. Only through the constitution of a political alternative able to take power, to establish a democratic government and to implement a national liberation program, could the tasks of the first phase of the Uruguayan revolution on the road to socialism be fulfilled (Massera, 1958, p. 56). Such were the diagnosis and prognosis of the Uruguayan communists during the 1960s, whose bases were established in 1958.

A process of profound changes was in progress in Uruguay since the end of the 1950's. Ten years later, the national situation had been completely transformed. With the triumph of the National Party (Partido Nacional, PN) in the 1958 elections, the most conservative political and social sectors took the control of the national government. A strongly anticommunist and stigmatizing anti-leftist discourse created the conditions for a series of violent actions

carried out by extreme right-wing groups from 1959-1962 against militants and houses of Left organizations, particularly Communists.

These violent acts seriously challenged PCU's commitment to democratic legality. In the face of police passivity, security precautions were taken by party authorities. Self-defense mechanisms and routines that included the carrying and handling of weapons were established (Leibner, 2011, p. 423). The public reaction of the party did not derive in a questioning of the rule of law. On the contrary the PCU requested its protective action. At the same time they denounced the complicity of some government sectors and of the US embassy with the criminal actions carried out by what they called as "fascist bands". Despite the restrictions experienced the Communists were optimistic about the democratic conditions of Uruguay in the Latin American context. Consequently, the PCU reaffirmed its commitment to legal political action, deploying a strategy in which, in combination with the "mobilization of the masses", the electoral competition and the parliamentary action were fundamental elements of its behavior.

Communist's ambivalence about the problem of the "roads to revolution" took concrete form in 1964. Two years after the formation of a political front to dispute the presidential and parliamentary elections with greater chances, the PCU decided to create a "military apparatus". Several testimonies and studies coincide in pointing out that in that year, probably as a consequence of the conclusions drawn from the Brazilian military coup, the PCU made a decision to begin its implementation.⁴ Of course, it was kept a secret for the majority of its militants. And it was probably also unknown for the majority of the leaders of a party that was publicly committed to legality and to the democratic regime prevailing in the country.

Taking into consideration the positions adopted from 1958 onwards about the ways of revolution, the existence of such military apparatus (that would only be publicly recognized in 1989), does not sound surprising. The preventions about the high likelihood of a violent resolution of the struggle against oligarchy and imperialism were stated since then and affirmed after the Cuban 1959 revolution and the Brazilian 1964 coup. The same was the call to be prepared "to move quickly from one form of struggle to the other", even in countries where, as was the case of Uruguay, the political situation allowed to advance to the revolution along the "least painful path". Even though it was never used for the purpose for which it was created, the communist military apparatus was developed simultaneously with the development of the mass

fronts (basically the labor movement and the student movement) and with the creation of a political front aimed to unify all the Left.

Although in the 1962 and 1966 elections the attempt to achieve the unity with socialists failed, communists did not abandon the purpose of promoting a left coalition. As it was mentioned above, the alliance that they established in 1962 with some small sectors split from both traditional parties was named FIDEL. The purpose to identify the coalition with the Cuban revolution and to capitalize by this way in its favor the popularity of its most recognized leader among the leftist electors was evident and explicit. At that historical moment, the dispute over the leading role as the best local representative of the Cuban experience was a key element of the competition among the Left parties in all areas. In the same year 1962 the PSU created another front called Unión Popular (UP) being mainly a coalition with a group split from the PN. In contrast with the very bad results obtained by the UP, the FIDEL managed to overcome the support obtained by the PCU in 1958.⁵

The year 1968 represented a very significant turning point in the national situation, which would pose new challenges to the implementation of the communist strategy. On one hand, as a consequence of the prolonged worsening of the economic situation, there was an increasing radicalization of the social protest. The labor movement, that had been recently unified, played a leading role. The student movement was reactivated and appealed to a repertoire of increasingly confrontational actions against the repressive forces. On the other hand, the State's response to the social protest evidenced a radical transformation. The traditional conflict resolution mode based on dialogue and negotiation, was substituted by increasing violent repression. In addition, the entry into the scene of the MLN and its guerrilla actions, coupled with the radicalization of other leftist groups (including the PSU, which was outlawed in December 1967), also represented a strong challenge to the communist strategy.

The Communists considered that the government headed by President Jorge Pacheco since December 1967 represented the direct access of the Uruguayan oligarchy to the control of the State. It also was the demonstration of the inability of the traditional parties to maintain the representation of the oligarchical interests by democratic means. The Communists point of view was that in such a context, far from defying democracy, the Left and popular organizations should denounce the authoritarian advance promoted by the government and claim the respect of democratic legality. They should act in the frame of the democratic institutions, not going against it. In a context of social and political radicalization, the PCU received strong criticism coming

from the Tupamaros, the Socialists and other leftist groups. While preparing their own armed branch, the Communists insisted on the importance of legality. They confronted the radical Left impugning calling to caution and prudence. Otherwise, they would contribute to the deterioration of the political situation, which would eventually harm leftist parties and social movements.

At the same time, the authoritarian shift of President Pacheco's government supported by the conservative groups of both traditional parties (the PN and the Colorado Party) encouraged the convergence of Marxist organizations with some liberal progressive groups coming from the traditional parties and with the Christian Democrats (who had founded its own party, the PDC, in 1962). After requesting unsuccessfully the dissolution of the Parliament and the call for anticipated elections, in June 1968 the PDC proposed the creation of a broad opposition front which should join all those political organizations opposed to Pacheco's government (Terra, 1971). A Movement for the Defense of Liberty and Sovereignty (*Movimiento en Defensa de la Libertad y la Soberanía*, MDLS) had been formed a few months before in March 1968. The MDLS had joined FIDEL and PDC's congressmen, union leaders and authorities of the State University (Universidad de la República). Besides the good intentions that had led to such a broad convergence, the MDLS did not survive the proof of the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia in August 1968. As a reaction to the PCU's support to the USSR military intervention in the European country, the PDC left the MDLS.

Conversations toward the formation of a unitary opposition front were reassumed on 1969. Encouraged by the advance of the authoritarian trends of Pacheco's government on one hand, and by the increasing violent action of the MLN on the other one, the negotiations arrived to a successful end on February 1971. With the formation of the Broad Front (Frente Amplio, FA) the Communists had finally obtained one their long term objectives. They considered the FA as the expression of the "unity without exclusions" to which the PCU was committed since 1956. The Socialists – strongly damaged after a decade of extra parliamentary action, three years of clandestine activity and a series of internal crisis followed by several splits –, eventually returned to legality on January 1971. They did so in the context of the negotiations that led to the formation of the broad leftist coalition. The FA would soon prove to be the first successful experience of electoral coordination of almost all the Left parties and movements in Uruguay. It included both Marxists, the Christian Democrats – who played a key role in the process of its formation –, and some progressive groups coming from the traditional parties. As a result, in the 1971

elections the Left could try to challenge, with some chance for the first time in the Uruguayan history, the predominant position of the traditional Colorado and National parties.

The perception of such an opportunity resulted not only as a consequence of the formation of the FA by itself, but also because of the interpretation of the national political context. The financial underpinnings of the political structure of competition based on the traditional clientelism were severely eroded due to the lasting economic stagnation and the increasing fiscal deficit. The old pattern of the political competition was notoriously shifting to a more programmatic one. That is not to say that the traditional pattern was exclusively based on particularistic clientelistic relations between parties and voters. It was a combination of clientelistic and programmatic relations, being the former the predominant ones. The challenging presence of the FA forced both traditional parties to reinforce their programmatic appeal in a time when it was increasingly difficult to maintain clientelistic practices in its broad extension.

In the 1971 elections the PCU was not benefited with a significant increase in its electoral support. The FIDEL obtained almost the same percentage reached in 1966 (around 6%). This result contrasted with the electoral expansion verified in 1962 and 1966. But in this opportunity the PCU was part of a major electoral coalition which obtained the support of 18% of the voters. This represented the most important challenge experienced by the traditional bipartisan system since the origins of the Uruguayan democracy. The FIDEL was the most voted faction inside the FA. At the same time the Communists were the majoritarian political trend in the labor movement, which five years before had constituted the Nacional Convention of Workers (*Convención Nacional de Trabajadores*, CNT), joining all the Uruguayan trade unions for the first time. In view of this situation, even recognizing that the election results were below their expectations, Arismendi assessed them with optimism. He pointed out that for the first time in its history the PCU was “a real political force” (Arismendi 1973, p. 94), so that an objective that was explicitly established in 1955 could finally be achieved. From the Communists political perspective, the creation and the initial electoral performance of the FA represented a qualitative jump in the process of construction of the social and political forces needed for the democratic and national revolution. Considering all these elements, the strategy approved in 1958 and implemented with intensity during the sixties was considered as confirmed by the facts.

The stiff and violent defeat of the MLN in September 1972 put an end to the guerrilla experience as an alternative way for the revolution in Uruguay.

The tragic end of the armed struggle promoted by the Tupamaros was also interpreted by the Communists as a confirmation of the validity of their own “strategy of accumulation of forces”. As it had happened ten years before, the self-containment demonstrated after the violent and painful attacks suffered by the Communists in 1972⁶ evidenced the disciplinary capacity of their party organization. At the same time, these events demonstrated the high conviction about the certainty of their option for electoral competition and social mobilization within the limits of democratic legality, even when it was severely diminished as a consequence of the empire of a permanent state of exception established in April 1972.⁷

The Communists had tactical and strategic reasons for such behavior. In the first level they were trying to avoid the dichotomy between chaos and order, which the government had installed with great help from MLN’s violent actions. As the rest of the Left was doing, the PCU also intended to demonstrate that “the true contradiction” was the one between the oligarchy and the people. At the same time, this tactical approach was related to their strategic view on the role of the military in the revolutionary process. Especially after the Brazilian coup and the instauration of a military dictatorship in 1964, the Uruguayan communists had incorporated the problem of the Armed Forces to their revolutionary strategic views. Although the military should not play a leading role in it, the revolution could not be successful without them. The point was not to obtain the participation of the Armed Forces as a whole, but to gain the collaboration of the “patriotic” military. These were those who, in a revolutionary situation, and due to their nationalist definitions, would not be willing to continue serving the maintenance of the oligarchical domination and the imperialist subordination.

That is why tactical and strategic considerations were linked around the military issue. In the Communists’ opinion the true contradiction was not between chaos and order, or subversion and institutions, but neither between military and civil people. To successfully confront the oligarchic forces, those members of the military who due to their nationalism had evolved into anti-imperialist positions must be incorporated to the popular side of the confrontation. This point demonstrated the ambiguities of the Communist strategy toward democracy. It was clearly exposed in February 1973, when the Army and the Air Force did not accept the presidential decision to designate a new Minister of National Defense. Guided by the reasons mentioned above, and probably also by erroneous information about the internal situation in the Armed Forces, the PCU did not reject the military insubordination. On

the contrary the Communists had positive expectations about the military contempt as evidence of the leading role of patriotic and progressive officials among the military (Leibner, 2011, pp. 613-614; Garcé, 2012, pp. 83-84).

At the same time, as well as ~~did~~ the majoritarian faction of the National Party did, the PCU and most of the FA groups saw the military insubordination as an opportunity to force the resignation of president Bordaberry. After eleven months in office he was in a situation characterized by institutional weakness, political isolation and public discredit. But the February 1973 episode finally concluded with a pact between the President and the military. As a result of that, the civil authority over the Armed Forces was affected more than it was before the insubordination. The military resulted strengthened and so was the position of the authoritarian factions inside the Armed Forces. The episode was a decisive step in the way to the instauration of a dictatorship. This finally occurred four months later, when the President dissolved the National Parliament. The PCU was then in the first line of the social and political resistance against the coup and the dictatorship. But the February 1973 events had revealed the limits imposed to their institutional loyalty by the ambiguities of their revolutionary strategy and by their views on democracy.

FINAL REMARKS

The communist strategy, which was formulated during the second half of the 50s, considered that the Uruguayan revolution would be part of a continental process which would only be successful if it was developed at a Latin American scale. It would be a national and democratic revolution, which would pave the way to socialism. To develop such a revolution the formation of a Democratic Front for National Liberation (Frente Democrático de Liberación Nacional, FDLN) was needed. The FDLN would express the alliance of all the social groups and political organizations opposed to oligarchy and imperialism. Its core would be constituted by the alliance between workers and peasants. But, to guarantee the transit to socialism, the leading role should be played by the working class since the beginning of the process. At the same time, to assure that the working class could lead the process, the development of the PCU as an organization with the capacity to be in the vanguard of the revolution was a key requirement. In general terms, the insurrectional way would be the most probable form of the Latin American revolution. But due to national particularities, the Communists considered that Uruguay had conditions for a pacific revolution. Anyway, they also pointed, once and again,

that revolutionaries should be prepared to move quickly “from one form of struggle to the other”. One does not need to be very imaginative to understand what this enunciation meant in the historical context where it was said: the Communists should be prepared to take up arms whenever it was required by the circumstances, meaning when the party leadership would decide to do so.

The Communist leaders considered that the crisis of the economic and social model that was in force since the 1930s, in addition to the inability of the traditional parties to lead its overcoming, represented an opportunity for the Left. A change in the political balance of power was needed to take such opportunity. To produce that change it was required to develop their own forces, expanding the party organization and its leading capacity, strengthening the trade union movement and increasing the Communist influence on its leaders. At the same time it was required to create broad social and political alliances to achieve the maximum possible isolation of the oligarchic-imperialist enemy. By implementing these guidelines the PCU had a relatively successful performance, if we consider it in the context of the Uruguayan Left of the 1960s. The party managed to reverse the adverse situation in which it had been immersed since the end of the 1950s, to improve its influence on the social movements and the Left, and to impulse the creation of a political front, which they considered as the germ of the FDLN. With the creation of the FA in 1971, the PCU became a fundamental part of the first real political and electoral challenge to the traditional parties in the Uruguayan history.

Considering this evolution, we can conclude that besides their own preventions, commitment to democratic legality had been very convenient for the Communists. Although it was still a small electoral party, to the end of the period under consideration the PCU had won the historical competition with the PSU, and evolved into a key player in the FA and in the CNT. The defeat of the MLN's guerrilla experience represented a confirmation of their preventions. Due to this performance, which evidences an efficient use of the political opportunities, it seems reasonable to conclude that, under that historical circumstances, the PCU did not have reasons to change a pattern of behavior oriented to the continuity of the existing political institutions. This was consistent with the two-steps revolutionary strategy, the first being the democratic and national one. Although liberal democracy was not their ideal political regime, the Communists considered that it was the preferred one on the way to socialism. So the important grade of democratic loyalty exhibited by the PCU between 1962 and 1973 could also be explained as a result of the consideration of different temporal horizons as part of their strategic guidelines.

Nevertheless, in the context of the crisis of democracy in 1972-1973, the ambiguities of the communist strategy became evident. It is true that the armed branch of the PCU did not go into action. This is a fact. But when the military disrespected the presidential authority in February 1973, the PCU assessed the situation with optimistic expectations, based on speculations about the role that nationalist and progressive factions in the Armed Forces could play in a revolutionary process.

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NOTES

¹ Following LINZ (1978) we conceive democratic or institutional loyalty as a kind of political behavior characterized by the commitment to the stability and continuity of the democratic political regime in which a determined collective subject – political party, labor union, business guild, etc. – develops its actions.

² Hereafter we will use the term “democracy”, without adjectives, to refer to liberal democracy. We do not pretend to ignore the richness and relevance of the debate about the contents and the forms of democracy that Communists themselves starred during the historical period approached in this work. The identification between democracy and liberal democracy – the same as with between democratic loyalty and institutional loyalty – that is made in this work responds only to the fact that our object of study is referred to Communists’ behavior towards the Uruguayan democratic political institutions really existing at that time, not to their ideal of democracy. Certainly, it was radically contrary to the liberal paradigm and took them to consider some political regimes which were undoubtedly authoritarian (such as those of the USSR, Cuba and other Communist countries) as being more democratic because of the condition of “State of all the People”, which means that the limitations imposed by the capitalist system to democracy were successfully overcame (RODRÍGUEZ, 1984).

³ The frequency of Arismendi’s trips to Havana and Moscow (in the latter case, on several opportunities as part of framework of European tours that used to include stays in Rome, Paris, Prague and Berlin) evidences an intense dialogue with Cuban, Soviet and European

leaders. In the record of the Uruguayan police intelligence service there is evidence of thirteen trips to Cuba and twenty to the USSR, including ten trips between Havana and Moscow via Prague, in the period 1959-1972. Source: Servicio de Inteligencia y Enlace: “Pronuario de Tibaldo Rodney Arismendi”, copy available at Fundación Rodney Arismendi, Montevideo.

⁴ Some testimonies about the military apparatus of the PCU: CALZADA (2007) y PICCARDO (2015). Academic works: LEIBNER (2011) y GARCÉ (2012).

⁵ In 1962 and 1966 the FIDEL obtained 3.5% and 5.7% of the total vote, above the 2.7% reached by the PCU in 1958. The UP obtained 2.3% in 1962 and the PSU obtained 0.9% in 1966, below the 3.5% obtained in 1958. Source: “Evolución electoral por Partido y por Departamento (1925-2009)”, Banco de Datos de Política y Relaciones Internacionales, FCS-UDELAR. Available at: <http://cienciassociales.edu.uy/bancosdedatos/elecciones-presidenciales-2/>.

⁶ On April 14, 1972, the headquarters of the PCU in Montevideo were violently occupied by a group of armed civil. Three days after, eight militants were murdered by security forces (LIEBNER, 2011, pp. 600-602; MARTINEZ, 2002).

⁷ In response to a series of murders committed by the MLN on April 14, 1972, the Executive Power decree the State of Internal War (*Estado de Guerra Interna*) for a 30 days period. After being extended for other 90 days for two times, it was perpetuated by the Parliament with the approval of the Security of the State Law (*Ley de Seguridad del Estado*) on July 5, 1972.

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