

Background- Uruguay¹

Uruguay is a small (3.4 million, est. 2016), wealthy South American country that is currently coming to terms with human rights abuses committed by the military regime that held power from 1973 to 1985.

Uruguay overcame a turbulent early history to achieve a stable, prosperous democracy in the 1950s. At the time of Uruguay's independence from Spain in 1811, it was a small, lightly populated region of about 30,000 mostly Spanish and Italian inhabitants. Uruguay immediately faced takeover attempts by nearby Argentina and Brazil and fought an almost century long civil war between its own rural Blanco Party and urban Colorado Party, including the imposition of a military regime from 1876 to 1890. However, beginning in the 1890s, Uruguay gradually stabilized, developed a successful economy based on ranching, and returned to democracy. Under Colorado Party president José Batlle y Ordóñez, Uruguay established welfare programs, abolished the death penalty, and gave women the right to vote and initiate divorce. During the Great Depression, President Gabriel Terra briefly established a dictatorship but World War II and the Korean War pulled Uruguay's economy out of the Depression and helped the country return to democracy.

Unfortunately, in the mid-1950s, Uruguay's economy collapsed, leading to leftist insurgencies that were countered by a brutal military regime from 1973 to 1985. Decreased demand for wool devastated Uruguay's ranches and caused inflation, unemployment, and mass emigration that successive Colorado and Blanco governments could not fix. In response, the leftist Tupamaros began a guerrilla campaign. In 1973, the military collaborated with president elect Juan María Bordaberry to overthrow the government and establish a military regime that suppressed the Tupamaros through a campaign of torture, extrajudicial executions, disappearances, and media censorship. The regime also participated in the torture, execution, and disappearance of leftist activists from neighboring Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay as part of an agreement the countries called "Operation Cóndor."² Ultimately, however, the military regime also failed to fix the economy and, in 1980, voters rejected the military's attempt to establish a new constitution. Recognizing its own increasing popularity, the military agreed to allow democratic presidential elections and Uruguay returned to democracy in 1985.

Despite the return to democracy, for almost 20 years Uruguay rejected demands to address the human rights abuse that had taken place under the military regime. Voters elected Colorado Party presidential candidate Julio María Sanguinetti, who finally succeeded in making major improvements to the economy but also signed the "ley de caducidad" providing amnesty for human rights abuses during the military regime.³ Activists attempted to overturn the amnesty law and obtained rulings against it from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 1992⁴

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² *Gelman v. Uruguay, Merits and Reparations, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 221 (Feb. 24, 2011)*, <https://iachr.lls.edu/cases/gelman-v-uruguay>.

³ Ley N° 15.848, <http://www.parlamento.gub.uy/leyes/ AccesoTextoLey.asp?Ley=15848&Anchor=#art1>.

⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Report 29/92—Uruguay, October 2, 1992, <https://www.cidh.oas.org/annualrep/92eng/Uruguay10.029.htm>.

and the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 1994.⁵ However, the law was upheld by Uruguay's Supreme Court in 1988 and by public referendums in 1989 and 2009.

The tide began to turn in 2005, when Uruguay elected a series of leftist politicians who initiated progressive reforms. As the economy improved in the 1990s, Uruguayans became concerned by the conservative government's threats to welfare programs and by its botched handling of the collapse of the Banco de Montevideo. The bank collapsed following fraud by executives and a run on the bank by Argentinians, prompted by Argentina's domestic economic crisis. Although the government pursued criminal charges against the executives and established procedures for refunds, residents of Montevideo rioted and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found that the government had imposed overly onerous requirements for refunding depositors' money.⁶ Increasingly, voters turned their support to the leftist Frente Amplio (Broad Front) party, which included both former Tupamaros and more moderate groups. In 2004, voters elected Frente Amplio presidential candidate Tabaré Vázquez, a center left socialist. When Vázquez's term ended in 2009, voters took the even more dramatic step of replacing him with José Mujica, a former Tupamaro guerrilla who had been convicted of killing a police officer and imprisoned and tortured for 14 years. Under Vázquez and Mujica, the economy continued to improve and the government made progressive reforms, including expanding healthcare and anti-poverty programs and enabling same-sex couples to marry and adopt children.

Most significantly, the new government began investigating the human rights abuses committed in the 1980s. Immediately upon taking office, Vázquez ordered the excavation of suspected burial sites, quickly unearthing the bodies of victims of extrajudicial executions. In 2006, Uruguay arrested Bordaberry and other former members of the military regime. In 2009, Uruguay's own Supreme Court rejected the amnesty law as unconstitutional,⁷ paving the way for lower courts to hand down decades long prison sentences to Bordaberry and other regime members. Finally, in 2011, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights rejected the amnesty law and Uruguay's Congress used the ruling as an opportunity to formally revoke it.⁸ Today, Uruguay is a stable democracy that generally respects human rights.

More information

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#), the [BBC Country Profile](#), the archive of [New York Times articles on Uruguay](#), and FRANCESCA LESSA, MEMORY AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN ARGENTINA AND URUGUAY (2013).

⁵ United Nations Human Rights Committee, Communication No. 322/1988: Rodríguez vs. Uruguay. CCPR/C/51/D/322/1988, August 9, 1994, <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/undocs/html/vws322.htm>.

⁶ Barbani Duarte et al. v. Uruguay, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 243 (Oct. 13, 2011), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/barbani-duarte-et-al-v-uruguay>.

⁷ Supreme Court of Justice of Uruguay, Unconstitutionality Sentence no. 365, October 19, 2009, <http://bjn.poderjudicial.gub.uy/BJNPUBLICA/> (use Búsqueda Selectiva to search for Número Sentencia: 365/2009 and Sedes: Suprema Corte de Justicia).

⁸ Ley N° 18.831, <http://www.parlamento.gub.uy/leves/ AccesoTextoLey.asp?Ley=18831&Anchor=>; Gelman v. Uruguay, Merits and Reparations, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 221 (Feb. 24, 2011), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/gelman-v-uruguay>.

For information on the state history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, and military, see [Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook](#).

For information about human rights, including all relevant treaties and legal documents, see [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

For an overview of Uruguay's current human rights situation, see the [U.S. Department of State's 2016 Human Rights Report on Uruguay](#).