

Uruguay: Background

People

The population is almost entirely white, mainly of Spanish and Italian descent; the "mestizos" account for 8% of the population. No Indian population has survived. Spanish is the national language and most Uruguayans are Roman Catholics.

The population in 1990 was 3,094,214, having grown at only 0.7% since 1980. The country is notable for its high proportion of urban dwellers. Approximately 85% of the people live in towns. Uruguay has thus avoided the problem of a sudden rural exodus, a phenomenon often found in countries experiencing economic problems.

The deteriorating economic situation in Uruguay has meant considerable hardship for many of its people. Prices have been increasing steadily, real wages declining and unemployment rising dramatically. The government has established the Emergency Social Investment Fund to allocate money obtained from donors to specific projects.

History

Portuguese attempts at colonization ended in the early 18th century when their settlements were captured by the Spanish. From 1726-1814 the country formed part of Spanish South America and underwent many changes of fortune during the wars of independence. In 1814 the armies of the Argentine confederation captured the capital and annexed the province. However, it was afterwards recaptured by the Portuguese and became a province of Brazil.

In 1825, the country threw off Brazilian rule. This action led to war between Argentina and Brazil which was settled by the mediation of the United Kingdom. In 1828, Uruguay was declared an independent state; in 1830, a republic.

The republic's early history was dominated by a civil war between two rival political parties, the Colorados and the Blancos. They are still the two chief political entities.

The country only emerged from its long political turmoil in 1903 when the Colorado leader Jose Batlle y Ordoñez was elected president. Uruguay quickly became known for its political stability and advanced social legislation.

However, as the country's prosperity ebbed over the past 30 years, the welfare state has become increasingly fictitious. The 1973-1985 period of military dictatorship stood in sharp contrast to a long tradition of democracy and social progress.

The dictatorship emerged from severe economic deterioration and the growth of urban terrorism. Harsh oppression of the opposition led to accusations of human rights abuses. Under the military state, spending continued to rise while the economy eroded. Montevideo began to sprout a few small shanty towns.

The early 1980s saw a gradual return to democracy but the economy has not substantially improved. The Colorados under President Sanguinetti took power in the 1984 election. They were defeated in 1989 by the Blancos led by President Lacalle Herrera.

Government

According to the constitution, the president appoints a council of 11 ministers and a secretary (Planning and Budget Office). A vice-president presides over congress. The legislature consists of a chamber of 99 deputies and a senate of 30 members (plus the vice-president). They are elected for five years by a system of proportional representation.