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The avuncular anarchist

Uruguay's guerrilla president



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José Mujica lives in a tiny house, rather than the presidential palace, and gives away 90% of his salary. He has legalised marijuana and gay marriage. But his greatest legacy, **Giles Tremlett** writes, is governing without giving up his revolutionary ideals

Five mo Mannise was just 16 when he met Uruguay's current president, José Mujica. On a spring day in 1969, Mannise was at home alone with his sister, Beatriz, when the future president burst out of the lift outside their penthouse in Montevideo with a pistol in his hand. "Turn around, shut your mouth and keep your hands above your head!" he barked. Mannise immediately recognised the pinched eyes and thick, wavy brown hair of one of the most notorious members of the daring, violent Tupamaro guerrillas. After his initial sense of panic subsided, he recalled, he felt strangely calm. "I remember telling the young gunman who was with him not to worry, that I wasn't going to do anything," the 62-year-old travel agent told me when we met in his favourite Montevideo bookshop, a short distance from the murky waters of the immense River Plate. His sister, who suffered from polio and used a wheelchair, was taken off to another room. "Don't worry *viejita*," Mujica told her, "you'll be fine, this has nothing to do with you." The colloquial, affectionate *viejita* - "little old lady" - was a typical Mujica touch.

Mannise's stepfather, José Pedro Púrpura, was a notorious judge, with ties to Uruguay's far right and a stock of pistols. After the gang had left, taking documents and weapons, Mannise told his relatives that he was only upset that the Tupamaros had stolen a typewriter he used for his schoolwork. The following day, the phone rang. "It is us, the same people from yesterday," a voice said. He suddenly felt scared again. Somehow they knew about the typewriter. If he wanted it back, the voice told him, he could find it in the lobby

of a nearby building. "Sure enough, it was there," he said. "They had left a typed message in it for my stepfather. 'Careful doctor,' it read. 'We are watching you.'" The following year, a Tupamaro unit sprayed their building with machine-gun fire in an attempt to assassinate *doctor* Púrpura.

Five years ago, in Uruguay's last presidential election, Mannise cast his vote for Mujica and his Broad Front party, a coalition of leftwingers that first displaced the dominant Colorado and National parties in 2005, with the election of Mujica's moderate predecessor, Tabaré Vázquez. "I might be expected to feel bitter about him," Mannise told me. "But he is the only one who practices what he preaches." A former revolutionary who still professes anarchist ideals has run Uruguay's government and its booming economy ever since. Mujica remains popular, but presidents cannot serve consecutive terms: the next election, on 26 October, will nevertheless represent a referendum on his pragmatic leftwing government.

He has gained international renown as a truculent truth-speaker: speeches lambasting rampant consumerism at the Rio+20 conference in 2012, and at the United Nations the following year, have garnered 3 million YouTube views. "What would happen to this planet if Indians had the same number of cars per family as in Germany?" he asked the audience in Rio. "How much oxygen would be left?" At the UN, he told the delegates to stop going to wasteful, expensive summits that achieve nothing. Some call him Latin America's Nelson Mandela, recalling his 13 years in jail. Others see a groundbreaking social liberal, who has introduced the world's most innovative cannabis legislation as well as gay marriage and legal abortion. Mostly, though, he is famous for the way he lives. The man who most Uruguayans call El Pepe →