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Election News Briefs: Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia

by LADB Staff

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May 10 elections in Paraguay still in doubt

With little more than two months before Paraguay's May 10 presidential elections, retired Gen. Lino Cesar Oviedo candidate for the governing Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR) remains in jail. While President Juan Carlos Wasmosy has made ambiguous statements regarding postponing the elections, opposition candidate Domingo Laino of the Alianza Democratica a coalition that includes the Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA) and the Partido Encuentro Nacional (PEN) is leading efforts to ensure that the elections are held as scheduled.

Oviedo has been in jail for more than two months on charges stemming from his 1996 unsuccessful coup attempt (see NotiSur, 02/06/98). His wife, Raquel Marin de Oviedo, and running mate Raul Cubas Grau are carrying out his campaign. "Lino Oviedo will once again triumph," said Raquel de Oviedo to cheering members of the Union Nacional de Colorados Eticos (UNACE), the ANR faction backing Oviedo. She said Oviedo would win the election "even if they have him in jail and don't let him carry out his campaign."

Despite, or perhaps because of, being in jail, Oviedo leads Laino in the latest polls. Oviedo's greatest strength is in the interior and rural areas, where 65% of Paraguayans live. In a poll by the First institute, 45.4% of respondents said they would vote for Oviedo, compared with 33.3% for Laino. In the same poll, 45% of those responding said Oviedo's imprisonment was justified, while 41% said it was an injustice.

Meanwhile, Wasmosy has given mixed signals about a possible postponement of elections. In mid-February, he said he would hand over power in August "with or without elections." He said if the court supports his petition to throw out all parties' primary elections because of irregularities, he would call off the elections and hand over power in August as scheduled, but to the president of the Supreme Court.

When the opposition demanded a clarification, Wasmosy backed away from the statement, saying elections would take place. Laino accuses the administration of preparing to cancel elections because it fears a defeat, pointing out that the Partido Colorado will be without a candidate if Oviedo is convicted before the May elections. Laino said the party is becoming increasingly concerned that, after holding power for more than 50 years, it might be out of office.

Nevertheless, Laino said he remains confident that, on May 10, "for the first time, Paraguay will be the scene of elections in which voters will be able to freely and openly cast their ballot." "Paraguay's problems," said Laino, "are being corrected because we have a new electoral code, a new voter register, and a new election tribunal (Tribunal Superior de Justicia)." Meanwhile, on Feb. 25, a Wasmosy aide said the president was considering turning over the government to a military junta,

but the statement was quickly denied by another aide. Whatever the president's intentions, concern is growing about the effects of the prolonged political crisis on the country.

Ecuador voters to replace interim president

On May 31, voters in Ecuador will replace interim President Fabian Alarcon, who was appointed by Congress after it ousted Abdala Bucaram in January 1997 (see NotiSur, 02/07/97). Possible candidates for the nation's executive post include a general, a TV journalist, a football coach, and a former Supreme Court president.

The principal contenders are:

Jaime Nebot, head of the right-wing Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). Nebot lost in 1994 to Sixto Duran Ballen and in the 1996 runoff to Bucaram. Although he leads in the polls, he insists he will not run.

Jamil Mahuad, Democracia Popular mayor of Quito who ran unsuccessfully in the 1988 elections. Mahuad announced his candidacy Feb. 25.

Freddy Ehlers, TV journalist, who is backed by the Movimiento Pachakutik and by campesino groups.

Gen. Paco Moncayo, head of the armed forces, who retired this week and who is being urged to run by center and left independent groups.

Former president Rodrigo Borja (1988-1992), leader of the Izquierda Democratica (ID). He has not announced his candidacy, and observers say his running would divide the left.- Independent deputy Ricardo Noboa, an unsuccessful candidate in several past elections.

Deputy Isidro Romero, who parlayed a 10-year stint as head of the Barcelona Soccer Team into a congressional seat.

Carlos Solorzano, former president of the Supreme Court who was fired by Congress.

Former deputy Jacinto Velazquez, center-right independent, who ran and lost in 1996.

Most recent polls give Nebot and Mahuad the greatest chance of winning, followed by Ehlers. To date, only Mahuad, Velazquez, and Solorzano have declared their candidacy. Velazquez, however, said if he does not obtain at least 12% in the polls by March 20, he will withdraw. He now has around 7%. The deadline for filing is March 30. The nation's strongest party, the PSC, faces a dilemma in the elections. Jaime Nebot leads the field in the polls, but refuses to be the party's candidate. Nebot has said he will not run because the country has not resolved its governability problems and lacks the resources to significantly address poverty.

Some political analysts attribute Nebot's refusal to run as a strategic political move, waiting for "a call from the Ecuadoran people." Others interpret his reluctance to indications in the polls that he could be defeated by Ehlers in the expected runoff, which will take place July 12. The PSC will field another candidate if Nebot does not change his mind, and possibilities include congressional president Heinz Moeller, Romero, and Noboa, who was formerly with the PSC and who has shown an interest in being the party's candidate.

Meanwhile, the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente has passed the electoral law for the May elections, which had to be completed before the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) can convoke the elections, which it is mandated to do by March 1. The Assembly approved the new electoral calendar and passed significant reforms. The new administration will take office Aug. 10 and will end its term Jan. 15, 2003. The Assembly also increased the number of deputies from 82 to 120, with each province electing two deputies, plus a possible additional deputy based on population.

Colombian elections still under cloud of last elections

As Colombians prepare to elect a new president May 31, the scandal surrounding the election of President Ernesto Samper in 1994 lingers. Governing Partido Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa faces accusations relating him to drug-cartel money because of his close association with Samper. Also casting a shadow over the elections is the spiraling violence from the guerrilla war and the right-wing paramilitaries.

Running against Serpa for the Partido Conservador will be Andres Pastrana Arango, who was narrowly defeated in 1994 and who, two days after the elections, turned over to authorities tapes linking the drug cartels to Samper's campaign. Pastrana won his party's nomination Feb. 20. A Gallup Colombia poll earlier this month showed Pastrana, son of late president Misael Pastrana, in second place behind Serpa, former interior minister in the Samper administration and close ally of the president.

While the opposition vote is divided among Pastrana and several independent contenders, polls show Pastrana would make a strong showing against Serpa in a runoff election, which will take place June 14 if no candidate wins more than 50% of the May vote. Some political analysts also say the Partido Conservador's chance could increase significantly if it won the support of various independent groups. Luis Valencia of the Universidad de Los Andes said a realignment of forces could emerge behind the two major candidates, and how those forces line up will become clearer after legislative elections March 8. Pastrana will undoubtedly focus his campaign around a theme of "a desire for change" to benefit the poor and unemployed, playing up the Partido Liberal's domination of the political scene since 1986.

Serpa will be painted by all other candidates as representing "more of the same," because of his ties to Samper. Other contenders include retired Gen. Harold Bedoya, former prosecutor Alfonso Valdivieso, and former foreign minister and former ambassador to London, Noemi Sanin. All three were linked, to some degree, with the Samper administration, and all are trying to assert their independence and distance themselves from the president. Bedoya was retired by Samper as head of the army. He has since formed an "anti-corruption" movement with a following largely in the cities among the middle class.

Some have suggested that Samper's decision to retire Bedoya was calculated to diminish support for Valdivieso. Valdivieso headed the investigation into allegations of links between the Samper campaign and the Cali drug cartel. He left the Partido Liberal to head his own independent movement, also built around an anti-corruption theme. Sanin resigned her ambassadorial post in London at the height of the drug scandal and has since been very critical of the administration. Another contender is former Bogota mayor Antanas Mockus.

Minority candidates Sanin, Valdivieso, Mockus, and Bedoya have begun to search for "a candidate to unite against continuism," and increase their chances against Serpa and Pastrana. The search was proposed by former Partido Liberal candidate Carlos Lleras de la Fuente, who withdrew his candidacy and who opposes both Serpa and Pastrana. Lleras de la Fuente, son of late Partido Liberal president Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-70), said the serious crisis Colombia is going through because of violence, insecurity, unemployment, and international deterioration demands and end to continuism. According to analysts, the biggest obstacle for "the minorities" is Bedoya, whose attitude against negotiations with the guerrillas makes the other candidates uneasy. [Sources: BBC News, 02/16/98, 02/19/98; Reuter, 02/20/98; El Nuevo Herald, 02/16/98, 02/22/98; Inter Press Service, 02/16/98, 02/21/98, 02/23/98; El Telegrafo (Ecuador), 02/23/98; Notimex, 02/06/98, 02/17/98, 02/20/98, 02/24/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/12/98, 02/16/98, 02/17/98, 02/19/98, 02/24/98; Hoy (Ecuador), El Comercio (Ecuador), 02/26,98]

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