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Paraguay's Ruling Party Seeks Unity as Jailed Candidate Barred from Elections

by LADB Staff

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Although the scheduled general elections are only two weeks away, whether they actually take place is still in doubt. The governing Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado) has a new presidential candidate after its standard-bearer was disqualified because he is serving a prison sentence. The party could lose power for the first time in 50 years. Government-instigated protests have brought out thousands of demonstrators to demand that the electoral tribunal postpone elections, their fears whipped up by party warnings that a defeat will throw government workers out in the street.

On April 19, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) disqualified former Gen. Lino Oviedo as a presidential candidate, following his conviction and 10-year jail sentence for a 1996 aborted coup attempt. At the same time, the court upheld Oviedo's dishonorable discharge from the army. Before the court handed down its decision, a bomb was set off outside the courthouse (see NotiSur, 03/20/98).

Court decision brings marriage of convenience

Following the court decision, two factions of the Partido Colorado met and reluctantly joined forces behind business tycoon Raul Cubas Grau, who had been Oviedo's running mate. Under the law, Cubas Grau had no choice but to accept the TSJE's designation of him as presidential candidate, even though the new vice-presidential candidate is ANR president Luis Maria Argana, a political enemy who fought to keep Oviedo off the ticket. President Juan Carlos Wasmosy did not attend the meeting. "We have nothing to discuss with Wasmosy," Cubas said.

Despite their pact and effusive statements of unity, the strain between the two factions was evident, even regarding the election date. Argana wants a postponement to buy time for a longer electoral campaign, but Cubas wants voting held as scheduled. Cubas promised that one of his first orders of business would be to pardon Oviedo, and he used the slogan, "Cubas in the presidential palace, Oviedo in power."

In a recorded message played at a political rally, Oviedo urged supporters to vote for Cubas, saying he would guarantee that Oviedo regain his freedom. On April 24, another ANR meeting was held, this time with the "Oviedista" Union Nacional de Colorados Eticos (UNACE), the Movimiento de Reconciliacion Colorada (MRC) headed by Argana, and Wasmosy's Accion Democratica Republicana (ADR). The three factions agreed that Wasmosy would not campaign for the party, and that campaign propaganda would mention neither the president nor Oviedo.

Argana said he and Cubas reached the agreement because otherwise "we could lose votes from our own party members." "We don't deny that Wasmosy is a Colorado," said Cubas, "but we

believe that he should not participate in the campaign because he is not a candidate, and only the candidates should campaign." Argana insisted that there is now "total harmony and a language of friends that will translate into a victory for the governing party that will prevent its fall from power."

The agreement, also stipulating that Cubas and Argana will appear together at political rallies, is recognized as a temporary move to ensure the support of as many registered Colorado voters as possible. Already several prominent ANR members have said they will back the opposition in the election. "Until May 10 we need to maintain unity and get out the vote for our candidates," said an Argana aide on a radio call-in show. "On the 11th, we will resume our disputes, but after winning the election."

Government employees march for postponement

While President Juan Carlos Wasmosy keeps repeating that a decision on postponing the elections is up to the Superior Tribunal de Justicia Electoral (STJE), and "not in my hands," the administration has encouraged public opposition to the May 10 date. On April 22, the defense, health, and education ministers along with some 2,000 civil servants marched through the streets, with the support of the administration, to demand that the STJE postpone the elections. Four hundred police and soldiers were deployed to keep order during the demonstration, and firecrackers were thrown against the STJE headquarters.

During the protest, the STJE electrified the security fence surrounding its building, which replaced a wall torn down earlier on government orders. "We are not going to hand over power as long as we are the majority," said Sen. Juan Galaverna, adding that the Colorados have the "citizen power" to stop the elections. "To stop the vote, all the party needs to do is mobilize its forces on election day and peacefully block access to the polling booths." The presidents of the CSJ, Raul Sapena, and of the STJE, Carlos Mojoli, point out that the Constitution stipulates that presidential elections must be held at least 90 days before the date the president-elect takes office, which is Aug. 15.

Some analysts say the government is promoting the demonstrations in the hope they will lead to social disturbances that would justify postponing the elections. Campaign relies on patronage At the time he was disqualified, Oviedo was leading in pre-election public opinion polls by seven points.

Following the court decision, the Alianza Democratica's Domingo Laino jumped ahead, but the two parties are now in a dead heat. The ANR's campaign charges that the Alianza, a coalition comprising the Liberal Radical Autentico and the Encuentro Nacional, would dismiss 10,000 civil servants if elected.

In response, the Alianza ran a paid ad that said "aptitude and integrity are the only requisites for entering public service." The system of political patronage is still working for the Colorados, demonstrated by the large turnout for the party-organized march. Handing out jobs and other favors has helped keep the party in power for more than 50 years. Public employees, along with their families, provide the party with a cushion of almost a million voters, and they fear that a change in government will mean the loss of their jobs. Analysts predict, however, that many Oviedo supporters will stay away from the polls, refusing to vote for anyone who collaborated in his prosecution.

Regardless of who wins the election whenever it takes place the Partido Colorado and the Paraguayan political scene has been changed forever. For the first time in half a century, the party faces a possible defeat at the polls. In addition, the intraparty divisions are so serious that the ANR can hardly be called one party. Meanwhile, the international community has warned of serious consequences should elections not take place.

"In the event of a disruption of the democratic process, the US, joined undoubtedly by the community of democratic nations in the hemisphere, will also take action with the aim of isolating those responsible," said State Department spokesman James Rubin in early April. And MERCOSUR issued a statement saying Paraguay's membership in the trade bloc would be suspended if elections do not take place as scheduled. [Sources: CNN, 04/18/98; Clarin (Argentina), 04/18/98, 04/20/98; Reuters, 04/08/98, 04/20/98, 04/22/98; Inter Press Service, 04/15/98, 04/22/98; Notimex, 04/17/98, 04/24/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/20/98, 04/21/98, 04/25/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/19/98, 04/26/98, 04/27/98]

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