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Analysis: Political Jockeying in Paraguay Amid Continued Uncertainty

by Guest

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The political crisis in Paraguay has eased somewhat in the wake of former president Raul Cubas Grau's resignation on March 28 and the transition of power to a new government. The departure of Cubas Grau and his political mentor, ex- Gen. Lino Cesar Oviedo, was heralded as a victory for democracy and the rule of law.

Many Paraguayans view the mass demonstrations that precipitated the collapse of the Cubas-Oviedo axis as evidence of an emerging new social consciousness in the country, which has been experimenting with democratic governance since the 35-year dictatorship of military strongman Alfredo Stroessner ended in 1992.

Despite the widespread sense that Paraguayan civil society turned a new leaf during what is now being called "el marzo paraguayo" (Paraguayan March), the euphoria is beginning to fade, and some caution that Paraguayan democracy, even without Oviedo, is anything but consolidated. El marzo paraguayo culminated in the assassination of popular Vice President Luis Maria Argana, a staunch opponent of Cubas, and the shooting deaths at the hands of Oviedista snipers of eight anti-Cubas protestors on March 26 (see NotiSur, 1999-04-09).

Cubas was forced to step down, and both he and Oviedo fled the country. A new government took control, headed by Luis Gonzalez Macchi, a member of the Arganista faction of the Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR). Macchi promised to heal internal divisions and formed a political advisory group (Consejo Politico) with representatives from each political party to help steer the "government of national unity."

Conflict increases over fate of vice presidency

Business-as-usual politics is slowing the momentum of reform, however, and old divisions between the Colorados and opposition parties remain. A key question is who will assume the now-vacant vice presidency. Macchi said his government would be one of "reconciliation," and for the first time in history non-Colorados were appointed to Cabinet posts. One of the most stunning declarations made in the first hours of the new government was that the vice presidential slot would likely be ceded to one of Paraguay's opposition parties.

After the Supreme Court upheld the legality of Macchi's April 4 announcement that he would serve out what would have been Cubas' term, discussion centered on whether elections for vice president would be held or an opposition politician would simply be named through a national

consensus process. As the Colorados reconsolidated their power, however, they began to publicly question placing an opponent in the vice presidency. Some argued that the country needed to move ahead with economic and political reforms and could ill afford the distractions and costs of national elections.

Others said that the executive could not function effectively if the president and vice president wore different political stripes. "It's just not convenient," said Interior Minister Walter Bower of the ANR. During the Cubas administration, Bower was president of the lower house and a leading figure in both the impeachment of Cubas and negotiations that saw him step down. "Let's suppose that Bower and others who represented the ANR [the day of Cubas' resignation], made the mistake of making some sort of promise," said Senate president Juan Carlos Galaverna. "That promise would have no validity because the law and the statutes say that a party convention is necessary to make such commitments. So we're not looking to revisit an issue that never existed in the first place. It's just that simple."

Paraguay's political opposition, led by the Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA), quickly condemned the ANR's about-face. The first half of May saw frequent and heated consultations between a multiparty *Comite Politico Nacional* and Jamie Bestard, the president's point man in the negotiations on the issue. Opposition changes its tune Given this furor, the May 18 announcement by PLRA leader Julio Cesar Franco that Paraguay's political parties had "arrived at a gentleman's agreement not to stir up the waters any longer with the issue of the vice presidency" came as a surprise.

Franco said they would concentrate on solving "this problem we're wrestling with forming a [multiparty] commission to produce a plan for the new government." PLRA sources indicate the party has begun to consider that it might negotiate an "exchange" of the vice presidency for greater participation in the "nucleus" of government.

While Partido Encuentro Nacional (PEN) president Euclides Acevedo said his party agreed with the PLRA's decision, Carlos Maria Ljubetic, president of the Partido Radical Febrerista (PRF), maintains that opposition parties should stand firm on the vice presidential issue. Political columnist Aliseo Paciello says the fight over the vice presidency "is distracting the attention, energy, and resources of the government and of Congress.

Social, economic, and other problems that have been ignored for a long time are being back-burnered by Paraguay's politicians. It's a sad public spectacle." Little if any consensus exists among opposition leaders regarding a strategy for securing the vice presidency or forwarding a vision of a pluralistic and democratic coalition government. Political commentators have criticized the opposition for being too concerned with securing political appointments for their members within the new administration.

Oviedistas hounded from power

In the meantime, supporters of Oviedo and Cubas are being removed from government. The Arganista faction of the ANR has prepared a list of 75 Oviedo supporters suspected of being involved in Argana's death and the assaults against protesters. A number of high-profile Oviedista politicians have been stripped of their political immunity and implicated in or charged with

involvement in the assassination and the sniping attacks, including Sens. Octavio Gomez, Victor Galeano Perrone, Enrique Gonzalez Quintana, and Jose Appleyard. With the credibility of Oviedo's Union de Colorados Eticos (UNACE) faction a shambles and its leader vilified, many supporters of Oviedo and Cubas have been removed from office by executive order or have resigned.

Others have simply dropped out of sight. Some observers have warned, however, that justice is being supplanted with vengeance. In one case, an Asuncion lawyer is being prosecuted in relation to the deaths of the student protestors on the basis of a photograph taken at a UNACE meeting in which he appears with Oviedo.

Paraguayan youth continue to protest

On May 17, protesters demanding the resignation of an Oviedista city official in the northern suburb of Roque Alonso clashed with police, and a 16-year-old girl was shot dead. Paraguayan TV captured the event, and the images of police firing into the crowd have increased resentment of the police and armed forces, already high after the police attacks on anti-Cubas crowds in late March.

Similar protests have continued against pro-Oviedo officials across the country since the collapse of the Cubas administration. In some cases, the targets are well-known staunch supporters of Oviedo; in others, they are simply unpopular officials faced with a populace whose passions and anger were aroused during the implosion of the Cubas regime. The armed forces and the police have been purged of Cubas appointees and Oviedo sympathizers, and key commands have been placed in the hands of officers loyal to the Arganista faction of the Partido Colorado.

Oviedo charged with mounting disinformation campaign

Cubas Grau has maintained a low profile since receiving asylum in Brazil. Oviedo, on the other hand, continues attempts to influence political events in Paraguay. Although his asylum in Argentina forbids his engaging in political activities, opponents say he is mounting a disinformation campaign within the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) to discredit the new government. Last week, the Buenos Aires daily Clarin reported allegations that Argana died of cancer and anti-Oviedistas in the ANR staged a fake assassination to turn public sentiment against Oviedo and Cubas.

Witnesses to both the shooting and the autopsy conducted on Argana confirm that the vice president was alive and well when the fatal attack came. "Argana was in perfect health at the moment of the shooting," said Dr. Jose Bellasai, who participated in the autopsy. "I can categorically affirm that [claims that Argana had heart disease or cancer] are totally false. He was hit five times by bullets and there are indications that, as he was being shot, he moved about and held up his arms in an attempt to protect himself." Investigation of Argana killing yields suspects A special Comision Bicameral de Investigacion (CBI) that includes lawmakers of various parties is investigating Argana's death.

On May 4, authorities said the principal assassin and his accomplices all with links to UNACE and Oviedo's inner circle were in custody and that Oviedo and former deputy Conrado Pappalardo ordered the killing. Those identified as participating in the assassination include Col. Vladimiro Woroniecki, government employee Walter Alfredo Gamarra also identified as one of the snipers

on March 26, Maximo Osorio Vera, ex-member of Paraguay's anti-narcotics agency (SENAD) and Oviedo's personal bodyguard, and Jose Villar Benitez, wanted on a previous warrant for the deaths of four police officers and an employee on the ranch of unseated Oviedista Sen. Octavio Gomez.

Interior Minister Bower said as many as 60 Oviedo supporters may have known of the plan to kill Argana, including members of the police, military, and the country's economic elite. The CBI is also investigating the political violence between March 23 and March 28. Oviedo, Cubas, Pappalardo, and ex-minister of defense Gen. Jose Felicisimo Segovia have all been formally implicated in the March 26 killings. Segovia is also charged with stealing US\$400,000 from the Defense Ministry during his tenure there.

A federal judge in Argentina rejected a request by a Paraguayan judge to arrest Oviedo, which many saw as evidence that the former general has the support of Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem, said to have close business ties to Oviedo. Formal extradition requests for Cubas, Oviedo, and Segovia have been lodged with the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, respectively, but the whereabouts of Pappalardo is unknown. Referring to extradition efforts, Attorney General Anibal Cabrera Veron said on May 18 that "within a month we will be able to discuss the matter with greater precision, and will have amassed more evidence against the accused."

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