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Duarte Escapes Censure Vote

by LADB Staff

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A censure vote against Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte failed to gather enough votes to pass on Dec. 13, 2005, although it did highlight the growing power among Duarte's legislative foes. Opposition parties Patria Querida (PQ) and Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA) stood behind the vote for censure, accusing Duarte of not tending to his presidential duties in favor of garnering power within his own Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR).

Opposition angry at Duarte's internal party politicking

Duarte's congressional opponents sought to bring the president to political trial with the censure motion but failed to have the motion archived in the official record when they only got about half the support of the Chamber of Deputies instead of the two-thirds required.

Oscar Salomon, a Colorado deputy who opposes Duarte, told reporters after the vote, "We had adhered to the project for a political trial presented by the opposition party PQ and, in the beginning, it appeared that we were going to have the necessary votes." "The Constitution points out that the political trial will only go forward with two-thirds of the votes of the 80 deputies, and today we only got the approval of 39 legislators, 37 voted to reject it, and four abstained," said Salomon, complaining that "Duarte was bombarding the mobile telephones of the deputies with calls asking that they not approve the trial." He added, "In any case, the 39 votes in favor of the PQ project, with the backing of the PLRA, should be seen as a wake-up call for Duarte because they represent a sign of discontent toward his management as a governing leader."

Colorado Deputy Benjamin Maciel said Duarte's opponents "failed in their project because, simply, there was no justification." Duarte will be competing for the position of party chief in internal Colorado elections set for Feb. 19. The Colorado party has historically been the dominant political force in the nation of six million people, holding absolute power during the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) and dominance during the halting democratization process since the end of Stroessner's regime. But, as the censure vote showed, opposition parties are flexing their growing muscle. The first and only political trial against a head of state in Paraguay took place in 1932, when parliament tried then-President Jose Guggiari (1928-1932).

In March 1999 the Senate sought to try President Raul Cubas (1998-1999), but he resigned amid the turmoil following the assassination of his vice president Luis Maria Argana (see NotiSur, 1999-03-12, 1999-03-26, and 1999-04-09).

Duarte in third year, small protests over US troops continue

Duarte is now in the third year of his presidency. A number of issues have caused some dissatisfaction with the Duarte administration, particularly his decision to allow hundreds of

US troops to be stationed at the Mariscal Estigarribia base in the Chaco desert, 280 km from the Bolivian border. Senators accused the Duarte administration of making secret deals with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and conducted inquiries to get Vice President Luis Castiglione to disclose what the executive branch had promised to the northern superpower (see NotiSur, 2005-09-02).

Small leftist groups have conducted protests against the presence of US troops, including one group that the Associated Press reported to be one hundred youths who marched to oppose the arrival of the new US Ambassador James Cason on Jan. 17. Cason comes to Asuncion from his stint as head of the US Interests Section in Havana, where he antagonized the Cuban government with a public display calling attention to prisoners arrested in a crackdown against US-supported dissidents (see NotiCen, 2005-01-13). He replaced John Francis Keane at the US Embassy. Cason said the US soldiers "arrive in small groups of no more than 20 individuals. The majority of them are doctors and veterinarians.

The Paraguayan Congress authorized the presence of 13 missions from July of last year until the end of 2006." The US troops, officials say, are conducting different tasks in Paraguay, like training officers in the presidential guard in "urban anti-terrorism" and "humanitarian operations" among rural populations. The demonstrators against Cason and the US military presence came from the leftist Frente Amplio, who chanted slogans against US President George W. Bush and for Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales.

"We are conducting this mobilization to call for the withdrawal of the North American soldiers from Paraguayan territory," said a woman with the march who did not want to be identified. "Supposedly, they are here to give social and health assistance to poor populations. In reality, the objective of President Bush is to observe some countries in the region like Bolivia, to keep an eye on the support of the people for the governments of the left."

Before the march, Frente Amplio leaders Victor Bareiro and Pedro Almada wrote and distributed a communique that criticized Duarte for permitting the entry of US officials and the upcoming opening of an office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Police reported no incidents during the march, which culminated with the burning of a US flag.

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