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Newly Released Paraguayan Coup Leader Oviedo Could Seek Presidency

by LADB Staff
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The Paraguayan political scene was rocked in September as retired Gen. Lino Cesar Oviedo former military chief, coup leader, and defendant in the killing of protestors and a former vice president was released from prison and announced his intention to run for the presidency in 2008. Polls show Oviedo to be the most popular candidate currently in the race and also find that he would win if he joined forces with former Roman Catholic Bishop Fernando Lugo, who is vying for the presidency as well.

Military tribunal orders Oviedo's release

After three years in a military prison, Oviedo was released from the military prison of Vinas Cue on the outskirts of the capital city of Asuncion on Sept. 6. He had been serving a 10-year jail sentence for an attempted coup in 1996 against ex-President Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993-98).

The military tribunal that ordered Oviedo's parole determined that he had completed more than half of his sentence, taking into account the four years he was detained in Brazil before he returned to Paraguay in 2004 (see NotiSur, 2004-06-25). Oviedo fled to Brazil in 1999. Oviedo, leader of the Union Nacional de Ciudadanos Eticos (UNACE) party, intends to participate in general elections next year, which would have to be approved by the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral.

Analysts and current President Nicanor Duarte say the former officer is not legally allowed to hold elected office because of the 10-year jail sentence that was imposed on him in 1998 by the military tribunal and approved by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). Oviedo is an extremely controversial figure in Paraguayan politics, with many holding him responsible for the shooting deaths of seven protestors in 1999. Sharpshooters killed the demonstrators in an Asuncion plaza after the murder of then-Vice President Luis Maria Argana (see NotiSur, 1999-03-26). He is also alleged to be the intellectual author behind Argana's murder.

In both cases he is under conditional liberty, but the trials continue. Oviedo's lawyers have said that they would ask for the dismissal of the charges, given that the legal time limit for the duration of a trial three years has already passed. After his release on the condition he not leave the country, Oviedo joined a caravan of hundreds of supporters in Asuncion to pray at the site of Paraguay's patron saint, which he said he promised to do if he won his freedom. He claims to be innocent of all charges against him and said the sentence for attempting a coup against Wasmosy "has been a mere political persecution in disguise." "I will free myself and I will govern Paraguay," Oviedo told supporters at the Basilica de la Virgen de Caacupe.
Paraguayan political analyst Alfredo Boccia says, "Oviedo is the most unpredictable politician in all of South America. His life has been a series of sudden changes of fortune, adventures, escapes, and clandestine declarations.

And in spite of all the accusations there are against him and against his messianic and populist speech, his figure grows and grows with the large popular support he relies on."

Oviedo will not be a populist in the mold of influential regional leader Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, saying "I absolutely detest" the policies of the socialist head of state. Surveys say Oviedo is top candidate Oviedo and Lugo are pushing to topple the nation's long-time ruling party. The Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado) has held power for over six decades, most prominently during the 35-year dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989).

High levels of poverty and uncontrollable corruption have made the electorate eager for change in leadership, according to opinion polls. In spite of the cases against Oviedo, the charismatic, 63-year-old general tops presidential polls.

A mid-September survey commissioned by newspaper ABC Color found that more than one-third of voters would choose him in the election, scheduled for April 2008, if he were allowed to run. The survey found that 31.5% of voters would choose Oviedo and 27.5% would vote for Lugo. In third place were the Colorados with 27.2% intending to vote for the candidate who will emerge from internal party elections on Dec. 16.

ANR candidates are ex-Education Minister Blanca Ovelar, who has Duarte's support; Vice President Luis Castiglioni, who has split with Duarte over his support for Ovelar; and Alberto Alderete, chief of the Partido Colorado. Duarte failed in his effort to remove the one-term limit for the presidency and now hopes to promote Ovelar as his successor. The survey put Pedro Fadul of the Partido Patria Querida (PPQ) in fourth place with 5.7%.

The poll, conducted by "First Analisis y Estudios" surveyed 1,111 Paraguayans between the ages of 18 and 69 from Sept. 9-14 and has a margin of error of 3%. Another poll question found that a ticket with Oviedo as president and Lugo as vice president would win 51.1% of the votes and the Colorado candidate would get 32.2%.

Lugo, a 56-year-old ex-cleric who was suspended by the Vatican "a divinis," heads a coalition called the Alianza Patriotica Para el Cambio (APC). The APC hopes to win against the Colorados in April. It includes most of the key opposition groups in the country like Encuentro Nacional (PEN), Pais Solidario (PPS), Revolucionario Febrerista (PRF), Democrata Cristiano (PDC), Movimiento al Socialismo (P-MAS), Frente Amplio and the Partido Democratico Progresista. The coalition does not, however, have the PPQ, while UNACE and the Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA) each abandoned it after Oviedo's release and Lugo's selection, respectively.