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Paraguay's Colorado Party Unable to Choose 2008 Presidential Candidate

by LADB Staff
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One month after it held its primary election, the party that has ruled Paraguay for six decades has failed to officially name its candidate for this year's presidential race, meaning that the general election date could be set back. The Dec. 16 vote among members of the Asociacion Nacional Republicano (ANR, Partido Colorado) was an extremely close contest between former education minister Blanca Ovelar, the favored candidate of President Nicanor Duarte, and former vice president Luis Castiglioni, a strong opponent of Duarte.

Castiglioni, who trailed Ovelar narrowly in the ballot counts that have been released, has alleged that "massive fraud" occurred and that Duarte's faction of the Partido Colorado was attempting to steal the election. In the meantime, the top three opposition groups in Paraguay have officially chosen their candidates who are campaigning to become the first politician in 61 years to unseat the Partido Colorado from the presidency.

Castiglioni contests Ovelar's claims of victory

Initial results showed Ovelar winning the ANR primary by thousands of votes, but Castiglioni disputed the results. Duarte and Ovelar have maintained that victory was theirs ever since results showed her leading with about 5,000 votes. Duarte leads the Movimiento Progresista Colorado (MPC), while Castiglioni's movement is called the Vanguardia Colorada.

Unofficial preliminary results based on 92% of the recount on Dec. 18 showed Ovelar with 45.2% of the vote and Castiglioni with 44.1%. That represented an advantage of 8,024 votes for Ovelar. The recount moved slowly, with results not expected until sometime in January. Castiglioni, a 45-year-old civil engineer, said Ovelar's claims to victory after exit polls were released indicating she would win were "grotesque and coarse."

Duarte shot back on Jan. 3 that "generally, those who lose, sue," implying that Castiglioni was trying to use electoral appeals to forestall a loss. Ovelar and Duarte claimed that they would concede if she lost "by one vote" and hoped Castiglioni would do the same. The deadline for parties to name a presidential candidate is Feb. 1, leaving the ANR only two more weeks to sort out the conflict.

The general election was set for April 20, although there is a rumor that the Ovelar-Castiglioni dispute could set the calendar back into May. The Constitution requires that the election occur at least three months before the inauguration of the new president on Aug. 15. The Dec. 16 vote also named congressional candidates for the Partido Colorado, regional governor candidates for 17 departments, members of party councils, and members of the Parlamento del MERCOSUR (Parlasur), the Southern Cone Common Market parliament.
A "complementary" vote was held on Dec. 30 in the Barrio Obrero neighborhood in the southern part of the capital of Asuncion. The 8,057 Colorados registered to vote there got a second chance at the ballots because of problems in the district during the count.

On Dec. 31, Castiglioni claimed a 624-vote advantage over Ovelar in the district, further narrowing the difference between the two. Castiglioni scored a victory in the second week of January when he forced Oscar Latorre, the head of Colorado tribunal in charge of the vote-counting, to step down. Latorre, considered a Duarte ally, was removed and replaced by Vanguardia Colorada member Alejandro Torres. MPC officials called on supporters to protest outside party headquarters prior to the vote that ousted Latorre and police were called in to surround the headquarters. "It was a judicial coup plotted by the Vanguardia Colorada," said ex-defense minister and Ovelar campaign chief Roberto Gonzalez.

The country's top electoral authority, the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE), has not yet stepped into the dispute, with its spokespeople saying they would leave the outcome up to authorities within the Partido Colorado. Gonzalez said he would call on the TSJE to intervene in the Latorre ouster.

The TSJE has said it would consider extending the Feb. 1 deadline. On Jan 15, the Colorado electoral tribunal said it would postpone its official declaration on the vote outcome until Jan. 21. Were she to win the presidency later this year, Ovelar, a 50-year-old former teacher, would join two other woman presidents in the Southern Cone, Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Cristina Fernandez in Argentina.

Close race for vice presidential candidate of left-wing coalition
The race to name the vice presidential candidate for the party representing the liberal-left in the general election saw a similar close count and claims of fraud, although the party has now decided the winner. Results of a Dec. 9 vote within the Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA) showed that Dr. Federico Franco won over Sen. Carlos Mateo Balmelli as the candidate for vice president by only 646 votes.

On Jan. 4, a recount said Franco received 145,527 votes while Balmelli took 144,881. Franco was also declared head of the party, the country's largest opposition group. Balmelli rejected the win for Franco, but ultimately lost out on his claims. Franco joins ex-cleric Fernando Lugo's Alianza Patriotica para el Cambio (APC), with former Catholic bishop Lugo as the presidential candidate and Franco as his running mate.

The other top opposition candidates are ex-Gen. Lino Oviedo, representing the Union Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE), and businessman Pedro Fadul of the Partido Patria Querida (PPQ). Right-wing populist Oviedo was jailed for leading a coup, but he was released and cleared of charges last year (see NotiSur, 2007-10-12 and 2007-11-09). UNACE ratified his candidacy on Jan. 14.