2-15-2008

Blanca Overlar to Represent Paraguay's Ruling Party in 2008 Presidential Race

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Blanca Ovelar to Represent Paraguay's Ruling Party in 2008 Presidential Race
by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Paraguay
Published: 2008-02-15

Paraguay's ruling party, the Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado), officially nominated former education minister Blanca Ovelar on Jan. 21 as its candidate for the April 20 presidential election, despite a legal challenge from former vice president Luis Castiglioni. The internal party vote had been in dispute for more than a month, with Castiglioni claiming fraud in the election (see NotiSur, 2008-01-18).

President Nicanor Duarte has backed Ovelar's bid to lead the Partido Colorado, which has held power in Paraguay for more than six decades. It has maintained control of the country's institutions since the transition to electoral democracy after the departure of dictator Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). Castiglioni leads a dissident wing of the ANR, strongly opposed to the Duarte faction. Paraguayan presidents are limited to a single term and Duarte's efforts to pass legislation that would have extended how long he could serve failed. The official nomination came more than a month after a razor-thin primary election that Castiglioni challenged.

The party's electoral commission (Tribunal Electoral Partidario, TEP) said on Jan. 21 that Ovelar won the Dec. 16 contest with 45.04% of the votes compared with Castiglione's 44.5%. The final difference was 4,020 votes. Ovelar, 50, dismissed the objections to her victory. "Our campaign is looking now at the election in April," she told reporters. "Our platform gives priority to the fight against poverty and to the creation of jobs." She said she would "fight for unity" within the divided party to win in April.

Castiglioni vows legal fight
But Castiglioni vowed to go to court to undo the nomination. "I do not recognize and I will never accept my alleged defeat because I have proof that 30,000 votes cast for me were stolen," he said. Castiglioni says he will take his case to the federal electoral court, the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE).

The Spanish newswire EFE reported that his supporters would consider taking their case to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). As the dispute regarding the mid-December internal party vote raged, Castiglioni's faction replaced the Duarte-allied head of the TEP and then lost control of the commission again. His allies also organized street protests against the TEP and alleged incidents of fraud.

In a Jan. 19 protest, his supporters mobilized thousands to protest in Asuncion, with Castiglioni telling the assembled demonstrators, "We have been the victims of an electoral fraud engineered through extortion and blackmail."
If she wins the election, Ovelar would become the third seated woman president in the Southern Cone, potentially joining Chile's Michelle Bachelet and Argentina's Cristina Fernandez. She is the first woman presidential candidate in the history of Paraguay. Ovelar's vice-presidential running mate is Carlos Maria Santacruz.

Is the opposition too split to defeat the Colorados?

Ovelar faces challenges from the candidacies of former Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo of the Alianza Patriotica para el Cambio (APC) and ex-Gen. Lino Oviedo, representing the Union Nacional de Ciudadanos Eticos (UNACE). Businessman Pedro Fadul of the Partido Patria Querida (PPQ) is also in the race, but has trailed badly in opinion polls. In the months before the Colorados named an official candidate, Oviedo led opinion polls, albeit with a minority of respondents supporting him. Some analysts express strong doubts that the opposition will be able to defeat Ovelar and the Colorado political machine.

With Lugo representing a populist left-wing opposition and Oviedo representing a rightist populism, the opposition vote would likely split and the election would favor the Colorados, in the estimation of these analysts.

The opposition candidates are warning that there will be fraud in April's election, putting them in line with Castiglioni's claims about the Partido Colorado primary election. Paraguay regularly lands near the bottom of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and public disillusionment with public institutions is widespread (see NotiSur, 2004-02-06).

Writing in the NACLA Report on the Americas, reporters Benjamin Dangl and April Howard argued that the 2008 election is unlikely to bring significant change to Paraguay's political scene, no matter who wins. Speaking of Castiglioni and Ovelar, they wrote, "The very fact that they represented the Colorado Party signaled that they will not challenge the status quo that is, the monolithic clientelist state apparatus that the party embodies. While adhering to conservative Colorado policies, Ovelar attacked corruption, promising 'systematic, rigorous, and professional' fiscal control."

The two reporters characterize Ovelar as being in the "statist," "clientelist" mode of Duarte and other traditional Colorado leaders and Castiglioni as a "neoliberal" overly dedicated to the economic desires of the US government. But Dangl and Howard also place little faith in the opposition, quoting Paraguayan sociologist and human rights advocate Marco Castillo, who says, "The Colorados are organized and capable, and could mobilize their wide support and state-based infrastructure to make any advances by the new [opposition-controlled] government impossible."

Castillo adds that, if the Partido Colorado does win the elections, a continuation of its clientelist, pro-business policies for the next five years could be "disastrous."

Ovelar has apparently sought to distance herself from the ANR's past regimes, saying on Feb. 10, "We have been in power for 60 years, and we need to do a self-criticism, because it is also certain that the Partido Colorado has maintained an authoritarian regime." But she defended the party's actions in the years since Stroessner's 1989 ouster.
"The party, in times of freedom, in 19 years of transition toward democracy, has been able to face up to an institutional transformation and an important renovation of leadership, making itself adequate to the codes of democracy." She characterized her opponents as a "retrograde [figure] disguised as a democrat," referring to Oviedo, and, in reference to Lugo, "an outdated messianic."

-- End --