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Fernando Lugo's Election Ends Six Decades of Colorado Rule in Paraguay

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For the first time in more than six decades, the Asociacion Nacional Republicano (ANR, Partido Colorado) has lost the presidency of Paraguay, with former Roman Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo winning the presidential election on April 20. Lugo’s Alianza Patriotica para el Cambio (APC) triumphed with a 10% margin over the Colorados and other opposition candidates, although no single political group will hold a majority in the Congress.

The 56-year-old ex-cleric says he intends to reduce corruption and clientelism in the notoriously shady government of Paraguay. He also intends to renegotiate revenue- and electricity-sharing deals on two hydroelectric dams Paraguay shares with Argentina and Brazil. Lugo had been projected as the firm favorite in opinion polls prior to the vote, although a number of organizations expressed concerns about whether the vote would be conducted cleanly.

But the night of the election, Lugo was acknowledged as the clear winner. Blanca Ovelar, representing the Partido Colorado, came in second, and rightist former Gen. Lino Cesar Oviedo, running with the Union Nacional de Ciudadanos Eticos (UNACE), took third place. "We have written a new page in the country's history," Lugo said during a news conference after polls closed in the capital Asuncion. He will succeed President Nicanor Duarte on Aug. 15.

High turnout, quick results

On April 20, the Web site for the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE) said that its rapid vote-count reporting system, the Transmision de Resultados Electorales Preliminares (TREP), had completed 92% of the preliminary count. Lugo had won 40.82% of the vote, with 704,966 ballots cast in his favor. Ovelar trailed by ten percentage points with 30.72% or 530,552 votes. Oviedo, with 21.98% or 379,571 votes, trailed Ovelar by almost the same gap that separated her from Lugo. Pedro Fadul of the Partido Patria Querida (PPQ) had 2.37% or 41,004 votes. TREP reported that 25,294 ballots, 1.46% of the vote, were nullified, while 2% (34,588) were left blank. No other candidate in the race attained even half a percentage point of the total vote. With 1,726,906 votes counted, 92% of the total number of ballots cast, the TSJE said voter participation had reached 65.64%.

The number of Paraguayans registered to vote was 2,861,940, meaning approximately 1,878,000 Paraguayans had come to the ballot boxes on April 20. TREP did not have the exact figure available at press time. The turnout rate of almost 66% was the highest in 15 years, matched only by the 1993 return to democracy when the Paraguayan public elected its first civilian president in almost four decades (see NotiSur, 1993-05-14 and 1993-08-20).
Seventy observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) monitored ballot stations, and electoral court chief Rafael Dendia said voting went smoothly. Former Colombian President Alfredo Pastrana, one of the observers, said turnout was high. Transparency International (TI), an organization monitoring for voter fraud, reported some cases of corruption. "We've seen voting cards being bought and money going around in some polling booths," one of the group's observers, Pilar Callizo, said in a television interview. "We also saw Partido Colorado teams inside and outside some polling stations creating an atmosphere of intimidation."

**Colorado control of the presidency broken after 61 years**

The win for Lugo's APC marks the end of the world's oldest ruling party. Not even the Kim family dynasty in North Korea has been in power as long as the Colorados. From 1947 to 1962, the Colorado Party was the only legal party in Paraguay, ruled by Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). During Stroessner's time, the country became infamous as a refuge for Nazi war criminals, including Joseph Mengele. The party stayed in power after a military coup ousted Stroessner (see NotiSur, 1989-02-07 and 1989-02-14), who died in exile in Brazil two years ago at the age of 93 (see NotiSur, 2006-08-25).

"People got tired of the ruling party and that's why an inexperienced politician, a former bishop, managed to defeat the region's oldest ruling party," Horacio Galeano Perrone, a former education minister, said by telephone. "While the country got poorer, a few people got much richer." The defeat of the Colorados is somewhat reminiscent of the decline of the party that controlled Mexico's presidency for most of the 20th century.

In Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) held the presidency for 71 years before former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) broke its string of victories in 2000 (see SourceMex, 2000-07-05). Post-election analyses in the domestic and international press attributed different reasons for Lugo's strength at the polls. Many pointed to President Duarte's severe unpopularity, with resentment of his efforts to take control of the Partido Colorado (see NotiSur, 2006-01-20), his failed attempt to change the Constitution so he could run for a second term as president, and the scandal involving a historically massive grocery store fire that killed hundreds, all of which badly tarnished his image.

The Ycua Bolanos fire of 2004 (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20, 2007-02-02 and 2008-02-22) exposed flaws in the safety-regulation enforcement in the capital city and, when the owners of the grocery store received light sentences, popular outrage at the alleged corruption of the courts increased. Another widely publicized incident harmed Duarte's image and the image of the country's authorities when the daughter of former President Raul Cubas Grau (1998-1999), 31-year-old Cecilia Cubas Gusinsky, died in captivity, leading Duarte to replace several of his top officials (see NotiSur, 2005-03-04).

The Partido Colorado also entered the election severely divided following its nominating process, with Vice President Luis Castiglioni accusing the Duarte-Ovelar faction of stealing the internal election that named Ovelar as the candidate. The fight between Castiglioni's faction, the Vanguardia Colorada, and Ovelar's faction, the Movimiento Progresista Colorado (MPC), dragged on for weeks (see NotiSur, 2008-01-18 and 2008-02-15), hindering Ovelar's ability to mount a campaign in the three months before the general election. The Vanguardia Colorada still maintains its dispute with the MPC faction, saying its bloc will legislate as a separate opposition force within the Congress.
Early polls had shown strong plurality support for Oviedo (see NotiSur, 2007-10-12 and 2007-11-09), but his brand of right-wing populism ultimately lost out to Lugo's campaign. One conspiracy theory had conjectured that Duarte had pressured the courts to release Oviedo so that he would split the opposition vote. Duarte denied that he had anything to do with Oviedo's release.

A number of analysts expressed concerns that the APC coalition brought together diverse political factions whose only binding trait was opposition to the Colorado government. They question whether the coalition will hold once its common enemy no longer controls the executive branch of government.

Other regional analysts question how much Lugo will be able to accomplish with Colorado loyalists occupying vast swathes of the governmental apparatus. Critics attack the Colorado machine as a clientelist system, awarding jobs and funds to loyalists by the tens of thousands in an impoverished country of less than 7 million people.

### Congressional makeup still pending

Lugo resigned his position as a Roman Catholic bishop in one of Paraguay's poorest regions, the department of San Pedro, to run for president. After being ordained in 1977, the church sent him to Ecuador. There, working among the poor in the Andes, he said he became a supporter of liberation theology, a strain of Christian thought that emphasizes political activism to improve the lives of the poor. Duarte, 51, took responsibility for his party's defeat and vowed to stay engaged in the country's politics.

Riordan Roett, director of Western Hemisphere studies at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, said Duarte would likely be the Partido Colorado's leader in the Senate, pending the outcome of the legislative elections. "The Partido Colorado will now fight for its convictions and for Paraguay from the opposition," Duarte said in a televised news conference.

The legislative makeup was not yet entirely determined by the time of publication, but the Colorados looked like they would maintain their number of seats in the Senate, 16, and the Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA) the party of Lugo's vice president Dr. Federico Franco might tie that number, making them the largest minority force in the Senate. The PPQ lost seats.

"You are responsible for the happiness of the majority of the Paraguayan people today," Lugo said as supporters chanted his name the day of the vote. "This is the Paraguay I dream about, with many colors, many faces, the Paraguay of everyone." Another win for the Latin American left Lugo joins several other left-leaning presidents who have come to power in recent years in Latin America, particularly in most of the countries of South America.

The spectrum has run from explicit socialists like Presidents Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia to union leader President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil and more centrist social democrats like Presidents Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay and Michelle Bachelet in Chile.

On April 23, Venezuela's Chavez greeted the president-elect of Paraguay, saying, "We lacked a priest." He said the addition of a cleric to the left-leaning club would mean that "we will be less
devilish and less demonic." Chavez added his congratulations to those of Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, saying that Lugo's win was "one more stone to bury the old neoliberal era."

These left-leaning presidents have come into office during a period of increasing commodity prices, allowing vast growth in agricultural, mining, and petroleum sectors of their economies. They have also taken office when the US administration of President George W. Bush has been primarily focused on its wars in southwest and central Asia, meaning the hemisphere's historic hegemon has been far less able to co-opt or exert influence on Latin America's leaders.

Critics of the socialist and social democratic rise accuse Chavez of trying to fund and support allies, alleging that he interferes in the internal politics of other countries in the region (see NotiSur, 2007-02-09 and 2008-03-28). Opponents leveled the same allegation against Lugo, claiming he was taking Chavez money, which Lugo denied. Lugo also denied having a strong ideological affinity with Chavez, saying his policies would be more moderate than the "Bolivarian socialist."

At a 2007 speech at George Washington University in the US, Lugo said, "Chavez assumes a leadership role and founds a single party, I don't think about founding any party; Chavez is a military person, I am a religious person." Lugo’s win may have strong ramifications for the US role within Paraguay. The US has increased its troop presence in Paraguay as other countries like Ecuador and Bolivia have reduced their military cooperation with Washington (see NotiSur, 2005-09-02).

Lugo has said he opposes the US troop presence within Paraguay. On March 24, Lugo told Paraguayan newspaper ABC Color that as president he would be against a free trade agreement (FTA) with the US. "I would rather try to keep deepening regional integration through adhesion and work with the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR)."

While Lugo prefers focusing on South American economic ties rather than US FTA deals, he is likely to run into the same problem former Paraguayan administrators have experienced with the bloc. Paraguay and Uruguay are economic dwarves compared with their neighbors Argentina and Brazil, and the governments of the former frequently complain that MERCOSUR's setup excessively favors the latter.

During his campaign, Lugo also advocated for agrarian reform, saying, "Every Paraguayan citizen has the right to be settled on their own land." During the campaign he railed against the gap between large landowners and the country's poor majority. "Paraguay is a major soybean producer and an important energy producer but even with that, 35% of the population lives in poverty," said Roett. "That is one of the great reasons Lugo was able to win this race."

Agriculture, including soybeans and cattle ranching, accounts for about 40% of Paraguay's US$9.1 billion economy, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said. Annual per capita income is about US$4,700. Joint dam deals with Brazil and Argentina key campaign issues Lugo campaigned on promises to restore Paraguay's "energy sovereignty" by charging neighboring Brazil and Argentina more for electricity generated by the country's biggest hydroelectric dams, the Itaipu dam held jointly with Brazil and the Yacyreta dam held with Argentina.
Brazilian President Lula, speaking at a UN event in Accra, Ghana, rejected Lugo's suggestion that Brazil should pay more for energy generated at the Itaipu dam, which Brazil helped build in the 1970s. "We have a treaty, and we're going to keep that treaty," Lula said, according to O Globo, based in Rio de Janeiro. Lugo says the energy treaties signed with Brazil and Argentina in the 1970s are unjust and should be renegotiated. He says he wants to maintain good relations with the two neighboring countries.

Lugo said the week after he takes office would be dedicated to beginning negotiations on the rates Brazil and Argentina pay for energy generated at the dams. "Our neighboring countries have a historic debt with the Paraguayan people because of these treaties, reached in the time of the dictatorship, when there wasn't any democracy in the country," Lugo said. "We see this as an unjust treaty."

Lugo accused the Colorados of fuzzy accounting for hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues from the Itaipu dam, the world's largest hydroelectric dam. He said renegotiating the contracts with Brazil at prices closer to market rates could transform the Paraguayan economy. The two countries are supposed to split the power from the dam, but Paraguay can only use about 20% of the power generated. The price for which it sells the remaining 30% to Brazil is several times below the market rate inside Brazil.

Duarte failed to get Lula to yield on the Itaipu issue in 2007 (see NotiSur, 2007-06-08), although Bolivia's Morales successfully negotiated to increase the price Brazil pays for gas imported from Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2007-04-13). Lugo hopes to parlay his friendly relation with Lula into a better deal for Paraguay.

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