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Paraguayan President Lugo Alleges Right-Wing Figures Planning Coup

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Paraguay's President Fernando Lugo, a mere two weeks into his term in office, alleged that former President Nicanor Duarte (2003-2008) and rightist ex-Gen. Lino Cesar Oviedo were involved in a plot to conduct a coup d'etat against his fledgling government. The opposition leaders denied Lugo's accusations, with Oviedo saying Lugo had been "tricked" into believing that an Aug. 31 meeting at Oviedo's house among top officials had been used to coordinate an overthrow plot against the president.

Crisis over ex-president's right to Senate seat

The allegations came amid a congressional crisis regarding whether Duarte should be seated as a senator for life in an advisory capacity.

Lugo said on Sept. 1 that the previous night there had been a meeting at Oviedo's house, with attendees including former President and leader of the Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado) Duarte, president of Congress Enrique Gonzalez Quintana, Attorney General Ruben Candia, and magistrate Juan Manuel Morales, the vice president of the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE).

Gen. Maximo Diaz Caceres, who serves as liaison between the armed forces and the parliament, was invited to the meeting and informed armed forces commander Gen. Bernardino Soto Estigarribia, who in turn informed the president.

Lugo alleged that the meeting attendees consulted with Diaz Caceres about the military's view on the congressional crisis, which reached a heated state when Gonzalez Quintana swore Duarte in as senator with a voice but no vote.

The swearing-in occurred despite opposition by the pro-Lugo majority in the upper house of Congress, which called the move illegal, saying that there was not a quorum in the hall when the ceremony occurred.

Lugo alleged that Gonzalez Quintana called Diaz Caceres to the meeting while the latter was at his home, sending a car for him, which took him "without prior knowledge to a private residence that turned out to be the home of Gen. Lino Oviedo." Once there, Diaz was supposedly invited by Oviedo to go into a room where he "was consulted about the views of the armed forces before the parliamentary crisis."

"Gen. Diaz replied that it was a political matter that should be solved in such an environment," said Lugo, praising the general's action in the meeting. "As constitutional president...I want to stress the
institutional gravity of the facts, which reveal a behavior that is incompatible with the aspirations of all the Paraguayan people," said Lugo. He pointed out that "the armed forces of the nation are a nondeliberative institution, that the judicial magistrates, judges, ministers, and attorney general of the state should adhere exclusively to their specific obligations."

**Lugo: Conspiracy an affront to 'sovereignty of the people'**

"My government will not allow the sovereignty of the people to be made into a joke, and those who seek to carry forward conspiratorial projects will be confronted with all the instruments the national Constitution puts in my hands," said Lugo in a Sept. 1 message to the country. He said would not allow the armed forces "to be used for sectarian purposes." Lugo added, "I urge the public to be alert to the putschist intentions of undemocratic and retrograde sectors."

Judge Morales denied having been at the meeting in a telephone interview with radio station Nanduti. "I was in my office, here I have staff, my employees may attest to that," Morales said. He also said that he did not know the general. Sen. Gonzalez Quintana, a member of Oviedo's party, also denied the existence of the meeting. "There was no meeting," he said, "but I am indeed always with Oviedo because he is my leader. It is absurd, this story of a supposed coup."

Oviedo also emphatically denied the allegations of conspiracy, saying that at no time was there a meeting on the issue at his house, although he did say that he received Duarte there. Oviedo denied having come to a secret agreement with Duarte on the congressional crisis. He also denied having made a pact with Duarte when he was president.

One popular and unproven conspiracy theory during the electoral campaign was that Duarte maneuvered to have Oviedo released from prison so that the ex-general would split the opposition vote and allow the Colorado candidate to win (see NotiSur, 2007-10-12).

Oviedo denied that there was any pact between him and the Colorados in exchange for absolving him of charges that he plotted a coup in the 1990s. Oviedo, who came in third in the election that Lugo won in April (see NotiSur, 2008-04-25), said that Lugo was surrounded by "snakes," particularly Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola. The rightist ex-general has heavily attacked Lugo's left-leaning government as being "very subordinated" to the leftist government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

A major question facing the reformist Lugo's presidency is whether it can be effective. A number of observers have noted that the Colorado party controls most of the nation's bureaucratic apparatus and may be able to stymie many of Lugo's efforts at reform (see NotiSur, 2008-02-15).

Paraguayan political culture is also reputed to be extremely intrigue-laden and corrupt. For example, the 1999 assassination of vice president Luis Maria Argana is still unclarified, with far more theories about who ordered the hit than convictions.

Oviedo faced suspicions in that murder but was not successfully prosecuted (see NotiSur, 2007-11-09). Lugo seeks to renew courts Since the Sept. 1 allegation of coup-plotting, the Lugo
administration has announced its intention to restaff the seats in the country's top courts this year, including the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and the TSJE, with the supervision of the Organization of American States (OAS).

"If other countries did it, why can't we do it?" said Lugo on Sept. 8, alluding to Ecuador's 2005 judicial reform under OAS supervision (see NotiSur, 2005-12-16). Filizzola said on Sept. 9, "What the president is doing is putting different alternatives under citizen consideration, and what is concrete is that we have to reform the Poder Judicial because Paraguayan justice is expensive, it is slow, and it is corrupt."

Most of the nine CSJ ministers "have a political godfather," said Filizzola, and he said that the judicial branch had to be "made up of people who get there by merit and aptitude." The reforms promoted by the president would also affect Attorney General Candia and TSJE vice president Morales. The CSJ was partially restaffed under the Duarte administration.

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