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Paternity Charges Compound Paraguayan President Lugo's Problems

by LADB Staff

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In the midst of a severe economic crisis and facing strong criticism from many social sectors that had supported him and a virulent offensive by the political opposition and the Catholic Church, Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo finds himself in the most difficult moment in his eight months in office. Protests are coming from all sides, and the government admits it does not have the resources to carry out its social programs and offer soft credits to medium-sized manufacturers, subsidies to small agrarian producers, or seeds to poor campesinos. In this setting, agrarian reform Lugo's major campaign promise remains a proposal.

Brazil, Paraguay's powerful neighbor and Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) partner, from whom Lugo expected solidarity and understanding, is refusing to renegotiate a new, more reasonable price for energy from the binational Itaipu hydroelectric dam, the world's largest operating hydroelectric plant and Paraguay's chief source of income after agriculture (see NotiSur, 2008-11-07). Now, paternity charges against Lugo, a former Catholic bishop, are jeopardizing his very permanence in office.

Economic crisis hitting country

The global crisis is being felt in the country. Paraguay, whose economy is extremely sensitive to external fluctuations, is expecting a sharp decline in the value of its agricultural exports, causing the government to lower its 2009 growth projections from 5% to 3%.

At the same time, Brazil and Argentina, its principal MERCOSUR partners, have imposed restrictions on imports from Paraguay. "This is a clear violation of the customs-union agreements," said Finance Minister Dionisio Borda in an interview with the daily newspaper ABC Color. "It forces us to take protectionist measures, which will be temporary but inevitable since [Brazil and Argentina] are ignoring the trade agreements and applying import restrictions on our products."

Borda added, "The measures are contained within the framework of an anti-crisis plan whose objective is to support small industry so it can maintain job opportunities, especially in apparel and insecticide manufacturing, the sectors hardest hit by the Argentine and Brazilian measures." Small manufacturers' demands have been partially met, but they are also calling for soft credits for which the state has no real resources, and a campaign to end smuggling, an endemic and historical evil in the country.

Added to those demands are those of the weakest sectors of the agricultural chain. Small landowners, campesinos, and Indians are the three social groups that formed the base of the political campaign of Lugo, who, while he was bishop, carried out a pastoral mission demanding a quick agrarian reform and support for the neglected rural poor.

Campesinos renew demands

In late March, the Federacion Nacional Campesina (FNC) resumed the action plan that it had suspended when Lugo took office and that included, among other measures, blocking principal highways in the country. Contradicting the president's earlier promise, Vice President Federico Franco said, "They need to understand that we are in a crisis and that their demands are not going to be satisfied." Franco is the head of the Partido Revolucionario Liberal Autentico (PRLA), the main party in the governing coalition but now decidedly at odds with the president.

Among the campesinos' demands are a food subsidy for six months in the areas affected by the worst drought in history, the provision of seeds for the next planting, and a regulatory system that prioritizes productive credit. To justify their demands, another rural-workers organization, the Mesa Nacional Coordinadora de Organizaciones Campesinas (MNCOC), cites official statistics showing that 80% of arable land belongs to 1% of landowners, and that 74% of lands adjudicated by the state remain in the hands of people not subject to agrarian reform.

The MNCOC warned that, if the government does not move forward with a just land distribution, the campesinos are going to occupy private lands and block national highways indefinitely. "Until now, the government has shown no signs of its agrarian reform plans, the people who work the land are as poor as ever, and the worst is they have not been given back the properties turned over to people who are not beneficiaries of the agrarian laws, like foreigners," said Pablo Ojeda, head of the MNCOC.

The organization asked the government to order the expulsion of Brazilian soy growers, whom it accuses of owning most of the 80% of productive land belonging to 1% of landowners (see NotiSur, 2009-02-27). The MNCOC's criticism became known when the government released the 2008 Censo Agropecuario Nacional, which showed a 5.7% reduction in the number of agricultural properties (a greater concentration of land) during the last decade, accompanied by a 36.6% increase in the total area of agricultural land, the result of a powerful advance by soy planters in native forests.

Economic difficulties increase tensions with Brasiguayos

On March 3, during his weekly press conference with national and international media, Lugo announced that he had sent a bill to Congress declaring "zero deforestation" for the department of Alto Paraguay on the border with Brazil. That is one of the areas dominated by Brasiguayos, the pejorative name Paraguayan campesinos give Brazilians who farm land in Paraguay. "From the air," said the president, "Alto Paraguay looks like a giant garden planted with soy, where various areas are grids where the vegetation has disappeared."

The FNC and MNCOC said, "The president is right, and that's even more reason for him to act quickly, because deforestation increases as Brasiguayos keep acquiring lands to plant this plague that is transgenic soy." This situation is fueling a dangerous nationalist sentiment, seen in statements to the press by social and political leaders.

The rejection of everything Brazilian is supported, moreover, by two facts. The first is the refusal of the government of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to renegotiate the Tratado de

Itaipu, which, since the dictatorships of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) in Paraguay and Humberto Castelo Branco (1964-1967) in Brazil, has regulated the sale of surplus energy from the gigantic dam. Paraguay only consumes 5% of the electricity it is entitled to, and the treaty requires it to sell Brazil what it does not use, exclusively and at a price 20 times less than the market.

The second is a succession of Brazilian military maneuvers in the border area, which Paraguay considers intimidating and has denounced as violating its territory. Two exercises involving thousands of troops are presently underway.

Isolated he has only received the support of Ecuador and the countries of the Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America (ALBA) Lugo is now besieged by paternity claims and by his vice president's antagonism. After accusing the president of "governing just for his friends," on April 20, Franco did not appear on the platform when the governing alliance celebrated the first anniversary of last year's electoral victory. He preferred to stay in the wings surrounded by PRLA leaders and militants who repeatedly interrupted the speeches with shouts of "Federico Presidente," while he smiled indulgently for photographers and TV cameras.

Not by chance, according to many analysts, in this difficult climate, accusations began to surface by various women saying they had children fathered by Lugo while he was a bishop. The president admitted being the father of one child and assumed responsibility for the child's support. In a country where frequent accusations of rape and pedophilia by priests are systematically ignored by the Catholic Church hierarchy, the Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya (CEP) was brutal with Lugo and asked "the Paraguayan people's forgiveness for this disgrace."

In addition, the CEP criticized Bishop Rogelio Livieres Plano of Ciudad del Este for publically "rejecting such hypocrisy" and saying that the CEP "was and is aware" of many such accusations. Other paternity allegations followed. The purpose seems to be to destroy Lugo. In an opinion piece on April 22, La Nacion newspaper called on "all Lugo's ex-women" to "file a collective lawsuit and in that way repair the damage caused by publicly embarrassing the ancient Catholic Church."

Immediately, more than 100 lawyers offered free services to "the victims." Some analysts are asking now whether the purpose is to destroy Lugo as a former bishop of the Catholic Church or to overthrow Lugo as president of the country. Perhaps the answer will not be long in coming.

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