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LADB Staff

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Troubles Continue for Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo

by LADB Staff

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Amid a growing wave of coup rumors and harassed by the rightist opposition, large rural landowners, and even a faction of the co-governing Partido Revolucionario Liberal Autentico (PRLA) of Vice President Federico Franco, Paraguayan President Federico Lugo is going through increasingly difficult days. Press coverage has been inundated with the specter of his removal by impeachment.

Every day, the media repeat statements by political leaders who accuse the president of "instigating a class struggle," calls from landowners exhorting their colleagues to arm themselves to defend their properties, threats of lawsuits from women who say they have children by Lugo from clandestine romantic relationships (see NotiSur, 2009-05-01) while he was a Catholic bishop (with the president's niece making an accusation not as a victim but as a witness), and even never-proven accusations of ties to alleged guerrilla groups that Lugo is supposedly financing and arming.

Despite the abundant accusations, the press also constantly claims that Lugo is an authoritarian president who threatens freedom of the press. In this context, the president replaced the military leadership and said that, if the coup plan succeeds, Franco hopes to succeed him. The destabilization campaign began when various opposition leaders said that they were negotiating to find the two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress needed to approve an impeachment process (see NotiSur, 2009-07-31).

In a statement printed in the local press and by international news agencies, Mario Abdo Benitez, vice president of the Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado) which governed for the 60 years prior to Lugo's election and even publically supported the bloody dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) said that Lugo "should resign because he is responsible for various extortion kidnappings and because, using Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's example, he is arming civilian commandos under the pretext of acting in defense of the less-fortunate classes."

Abdo Benitez offered no proof of his allegations. In statements reproduced by Radio Nederland, Alfredo Boccia, a columnist for the Asuncion daily Ultima Hora, said, "Beyond the trial that the press has engaged in from the outset and that legislators are now trying to formalize, Lugo's popularity has suffered from the paternity scandals."

He added, "If the impeachment initiative succeeds, Paraguay will be plunged into chaos because Lugo will be removed from office and replaced by Franco."

President answers charges of being confrontational

Less subtly, Sen. Alfredo Jaeggli, president of the strategic budget committee (Comision Bicamaral de Presupuesto) and a prominent figure of the PRLA opposition faction, said, "To avoid

impeachment, Lugo should resign now, although let's not forget that he was elected to govern until Aug. 15, 2013."

At the same time, Jaeggli sponsored a Senate resolution to bar the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and congressional leaders from participating in a meeting with the president in which the three branches of government would begin to draw up a public-security policy.

The PRLA leader said, "You can't talk about negotiating with someone whose speech is confrontational." It was the first sign of the seriousness of the conflict. What had Lugo said to cause Jaeggli and other political and business leaders to talk about "confrontational speech"? Responding to criticism from his opponents, the president said, "Certain sectors want to stop the process of change, and I say that change will not be stopped and social inclusion much less so."

He added, "Despite the lamentations of the prophets of the past, those who want the mafias and the few people of privilege to continue designing our roadmap, and although we hear the hurtful song of those who accuse us with lies, here I am and here I will stay, because I am a party to the hopes of the Paraguayan people."

In the most critical section of his speech, Lugo said, "Those who want to change the country are those who don't have bank accounts, those who don't appear on the society pages of the papers every day, those flesh and blood poor who have no possibility of work and survive on one meal a day (if they're lucky), without potable water and with misery hounding them, while those who would deny change are those who sit in the comfort of their air-conditioned offices, looking at their privileged past and defending their savings accounts in international banks."

Rightist analyst Carlos Redil, a consultant for the legislative opposition, called Lugo's words "the worst part of an incendiary speech with which he openly called for class struggle." Facing the pompous accusations and growing coup rumors, Lugo opted for a pacifying speech, first denying that the vice president would be interested in his removal or that the military were deliberating and meeting in their quarters. He only reacted after three of his most well-known allies made charges against the pro-coup opposition.

Sen. Luis Alberto Wagner openly accused Franco of "undermining" the democratic process to "overthrow the president and take his place." Gov. Carlos Amarilla of the Central department said, "Franco has a burning desire to become president, and that's why he is promoting impeachment."

And campesino leader Pablo Caballero said, "Franco and his friends are inventing the existence of an armed group in order to remove the president." Wagner, Amarilla, and Caballero belong to the PRLA's democratic wing that backs the Lugo administration and rejects the possibility that the party support a constitutional break through impeachment.

Lugo replaces military commanders

Finally, Lugo admitted, "We are overwhelmed by a wave of rumors that talks of bombs exploding, extortionist kidnappings, assaults, and coups." Two weeks after the destabilizing rumors began,

Lugo reacted strongly. He replaced the Army, Navy, and Air Force commanders, admitted the existence of "pro-coup pockets in the armed forces who are manipulated by unscrupulous politicians," and said he had received reports that Franco was conspiring to replace him as president.

On Nov. 5, the Brazil daily Folha de Sao Paulo quoted unidentified analysts saying, "Lugo is going through his worst moment." As an example, it pointed out that no sooner had military leaders' replacements been announced than "the new Navy chief encountered the first problem the theft of dozens of weapons, belonging to the Direccion de Material Belico of the armed forces, from an exhibit in the Museo Militar." It added tersely, "It's noteworthy that the museum is housed within a military installation."

For other analysts, the theft was the first warning from the military that it was not going to passively accept changes. The second reaction, the same day, came from Eduardo Aviles, a powerful Chilean landowner who has lived in Paraguay since 1970 when he fled Chile because he was the prime civilian suspect in the assassination of Gen. Rene Schneider Chereau, commander in chief of the Chilean Army, who defended the right of democratically elected President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) to take office against a group of officers who rejected the election results.

Since his arrival in Paraguay, Aviles has headed a group of large landowners who use violence to deter campesino demands. On Nov. 5, an email was made public from Aviles calling on his colleagues to "arm yourselves to combat these communist sons of bitches whom the president is training and arming to go after our properties." Alberto Soljancic, president of the Asociacion Rural del Paraguay (ARP), responded to the email, saying, "Violence is not good."

But he asked, "What else can we do to end this situation that distresses us so?" It is not known at this point whether the rural producers have armed private militias, but their willingness to use extreme violence was made clear on Nov. 9, when the landowners led by Aviles sprayed glyphosate and other toxic agrochemicals on 200 Indians from the Ava Guarani community in Alto Parana department, 300 km southeast of Asuncion. The Indians had met to demand the return of 15,000 ha of their ancestral lands, forcibly taken over by soy growers. In those days of coup rumors, Lugo decided to suspend the Nuevos Horizontes joint military exercises, which were to be carried out by 1,500 US and Paraguayan soldiers.

Analyst Hugo Richer interpreted this as a warning to Washington about its presumed interference in the country's internal affairs. US Ambassador Liliana Ayalde quickly told opposition Asuncion newspaper ABC Color that the administration of US President Barack Obama was not involved in any supposed coup attempt. "That is absurd," said Ayalde.

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