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While the Paraguayan political opposition's unrelenting destabilization campaign keeps the democratic government's back to the wall and President Fernando Lugo tries to minimize the right's assault, the possibility of a coup is a cause for extreme concern among other countries of the region, especially Paraguay's allies in the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR). The ongoing threat to initiate impeachment proceedings against the president has intensified in recent weeks, helped along by the reality that Lugo barely hangs on to the full support of three of the 125 lawmakers in Congress. The opposition campaign is taking place within a context in which certain government achievements are muddied by the reappearance of serious acts of corruption in the judiciary and at a time when liberal sectors of the governing coalition have cornered Lugo, pushing him to launch a repressive campaign aimed at eradicating a "guerrilla threat" that not all analysts believe exists. On at least 10 occasions since mid-December, the president has referred to what he defines as a "political adventure," the eventuality of a direct or indirect coup through his removal in a legislative process. On Jan. 2, he went so far as to deny destabilizing rumors in a written communique, a rarely used way of being in contact with society. After pointing out that, since he took office in August 2008, he had been the target of numerous coup attempts, Lugo said, "The Paraguayan people and the international community do not support an anti-democratic adventure." Without specifically naming it, the president pointed to the Partido Colorado (PC) as the visible head of the pro-coup effort when he said in his communique, "After decades of absolute domination by one group it should not come as a surprise that since this administration took office some sectors and persons have been tempted to interrupt the democratic process." The PC governed without interruption for 70 years, including during the bloody dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). The opposition avails itself of any circumstance to attack Lugo. Although there is no concrete issue on which to impeach him, the threat of such action has become a constant and is considered justifiable by his detractors on three grounds: a never-proved act of corruption allegedly involving the purchase of land to be distributed within an incipient agrarian reform; the kidnapping of a now-released landowner, carried out by a fictitious or real guerrilla group (see NotiSur, 2009-02-27), which, despite the drastic repression unleashed in the northern departments where it supposedly operates, the opposition claims is made up of "friends of the president"; and a series of paternity claims (see NotiSur, 2009-05-01) not recognized by the president, which the opposition says "impacts and damages the country's international image." With the intensification of the campaign to remove Lugo, members of the Fuerzas Democraticas Progresistas de Paraguay made up of pro-government organizations asked during a visit to other countries in the region that the "international community actively support Lugo's continuation in office to prevent something like what happened in Honduras from happening in Paraguay," referring to the June 28 coup that removed constitutional President Manuel Zelaya (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). In Buenos Aires, Oscar Laborde, secretary of regional relations at the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, said, "The Argentine government is concerned about rumors of a coup in Paraguay." He said that a group of lawmakers and civic and party leaders would visit the country to "support the democratic government" and that government and political figures from throughout the region would be invited to join this "official mission." In Brazil, Foreign Minister Celso Amorim
backed the idea of MERCOSUR countries jointly expressing their support. From Montevideo, President Tabare Vazquez spoke of "the identification that we Uruguayans feel with President Lugo," and President-elect Jose Mujica said, "The rumors coming from Paraguay are not good." In mid-January, Presidents Michele Bachelet of Chile and Evo Morales of Bolivia took advantage of public appearances to indicate that Lugo and his administration could also count on their support. The new offensive is happening as the government claims some successes and when a poll by international consulting firm Ati Snead showed Lugo's positive-image rating at 58.9%, perhaps the opposition's greatest obstacle to carrying out its threats. The government measure receiving the most approval was the provision for free health services. Health Minister Esperanza Martinez said that, in the first half of 2009, 3.2 million patients were seen "and the government refrained from charging those receiving the services US$3.2 million because the cost of each consultation was set at US$. That has ended the anguish for those who, before, could not access health services, and it also strongly supports the policy of fighting poverty, saving out-of-pocket expenses for all of those patients." The government can also boast of having the lowest inflation rate in four decades, just 1.9%. Most analysts say that the destabilization campaign found its staunchest ally in the judiciary. On Dec. 31, the three judges of the Sala Constitucional of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) handed down a decision reinstating two CSJ judges fired by Congress in 2003, after both were proven to have committed serious acts of corruption (see NotiSur, 2003-11-07). Without any foundation, and despite the administration's rejection of the decision, the opposition accused the government of having promoted the judges' reinstatement. By trying to blame Lugo, the intention was to open a new confrontation between the executive and the legislative branches, giving the opposition the best argument for moving forward with impeachment. "This is the first step toward establishing a dictatorship," said former Gen. Lino Oviedo, leader of the Union Nacional de Colorado Étics (UNACE), a party with a strong presence in Congress. Before the present CSJ overturned his conviction (see NotiSur, 2007-11-09), Oviedo had been found guilty of participating in an attempted coup (see NotiSur, 1998-09-11), of responsibility for the assassination of Vice President Luis Maria Argana in March 1999 (see NotiSur, 1999-03-26), and of ordering a massacre of civilians (see NotiSur, 1999-04-09). Finally, after the reinstatement of the judges had opened a crisis whose outcome was uncertain, the CSJ annulled the decision of the Sala Constitucional. It is necessary to look elsewhere for the reasons for Oviedo's violent reaction and the CSJ's final decision: upholding the decision to reinstate the two judges would have meant having to annul all the decisions of the present CSJ, among them, and fundamentally, Oviedo's acquittal. The UNACE bloc of deputies hailed the CSJ decision and celebrated that with it, the decision to overturn Oviedo's conviction was upheld. "With this decision, harmony is restored among the branches of government, and the rule of law is re-established, the country deserves [a Congress] that attends to the needs of the people and not legal atrocities," said a UNACE communique. Just as this crisis ended, powerful landowner Fidel Zavala was released after being held for three months by the Ejercito de Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), an alleged guerrilla group that, it is said, operates in the departments of San Pedro and Concepcion (340 km and 440 km, respectively, north of Asuncion). This is precisely the geographic area where Lugo carried out his pastoral duties before resigning as a bishop of the Catholic Church to run for political office. The government felt the need to send the police and the Army in search of Zavala and in the process unleashed an indiscriminate repression that ended up pitting Lugo against the social movements that had always supported him. Jose Ledesma, governor of San Pedro and an old friend and ally of Lugo, energetically demanded that the president "immediately cease criminalizing social protest." Many analysts say the rupture between the government and its bases is what those within the administration who pushed for the repressive actions in the north were looking for.
all quote Vice President Federico Franco, who has expressed support for impeaching his former ally and who has said repeatedly that he is "prepared for any eventuality."

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