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Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo Deals with Ongoing Health, Political Problems

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Far from acting with solidarity or at least understanding in the face of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo's physical suffering from the chemotherapy treatment for cancer that he has been undergoing since early August (NotiSur, Oct. 1, 2010), the rightist opposition has redoubled its destabilizing offensive.

Although it continues dangling the possibility of impeaching Lugo to remove him from the office to which he was overwhelmingly elected in 2008, the right and the media it controls are now trying to sell the idea that the head of state's illness has incapacitated him. With pious hypocrisy, they are now offering Lugo the alternative of a "special permission" to take a leave "from the presidency for a time, until he is fully recovered."

Responding to the insistent "offers" from his political enemies—headed since the beginning of this campaign by Vice President Federico Franco, who persists in letting it be known that he is waiting in the wings ready to take over—Lugo twice has had to explain publically that he is not willing either to accept the offer of a leave or to ask for it, "simply because it is not necessary."

The president responded similarly on both Nov. 4 and Nov. 7. He spoke frankly about his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma—in the thorax, intestine, and vertebrae—and said that, "besides being and feeling very well, I demand the right to dignity and the privacy safeguards of medical ethics."

Day by day, the president is overcoming the right's attacks, but he seems politically spent. To make matters worse, the Nov. 7 municipal elections, which he treated as a plebiscite, saw the triumphal return of the conservative Partido Colorado (PC) and an inauspicious showing for the Frente Guasú, the leftist grouping conceived and created to become his principal civil support.

The facts would seem to question whether Lugo is really "very well," as he claims. And they also seem to challenge the PC's premature crowing about expectations of victory in the 2013 presidential elections, because, since the municipal elections resurrected the ambitions of the traditional party of dictator Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), it has already split into three sectors led by three people considered possible presidential candidates.

Vice president takes advantage of Lugo's absence

In early October, Lugo was at death's door as a result of a blood clot that forced him to be sent immediately to São Paulo, Brazil, where he is being treated for his lymphoma thanks to a special offer from his colleague Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. But he recovered quickly, in a week during which speculations from the seat of power shook the spirits of the population.

The person responsible, as on all previous occasions, was Franco. The vice president alleged that some changes in the military hierarchy had been made without his consent, and he complained to Congress, which devoted a lengthy session to insulting Lugo and reintroducing the prospect of impeachment, although the opposition still does not have the necessary votes.
Franco and opposition deputies wanted to ignore that the president, in going to São Paulo, delegated his authority to Franco but not the leadership of the armed forces, which constitutionally cannot be delegated. Their coup attempts were again foiled.

It was obvious that those wanting to oust Lugo would resume the offensive after the Nov. 11 municipal elections. They could then count on possibly capitalizing on some signs of discontent in important sectors that had been decisive in the former Catholic bishop's election to the presidency.

The most important disaffected sector is made up of campesinos, who resumed land occupations to protest Lugo's unfulfilled promise to push for agrarian reform. More than two years into the president's term, that hoped-for structural change has only resulted in some small parcels of land being handed over (NotiSur, July 16, 2010).

Paraguay's most critical social problem is the more than 300,000 landless and wandering campesinos in an essentially agricultural country whose best lands have been taken over by Brazilian and Argentine soy producers. While a lack of resources is the primary reason that agrarian reform is still only a promise, the opposition has also put every possible obstacle in the way so that the agrarian situation remains unchanged. Their obstructionism has even prevented the creation of a land registry, vital for designing any government policy on the matter.

The second group showing discontent includes the government-workers unions, which began a protest against a bill to privatize the two principal airports in the country and against the rumored transfer of operations at the Mariscal Estigarribia air base, a strategic point 540 km north of the capital Asunción, to US armed forces personnel for carrying out undercover operations.

Voting procedures contribute to abstentionism

On Nov. 11, the PC's victory put the government in a complex but also open situation, said correspondents of the magazines (Uruguay) and (Argentina), using almost the same words. And the analyses of most international news agencies agreed. In the municipal elections, the governing coalition's lack of campaign experience was up against all the opposition's tricks and an electoral system that analysts describe as "one that discourages participation," above all among the youngest voters in the country.

In his repeated efforts to reduce the country's chronic abstentionism (on Nov. 11, only 45% of eligible voters went to the polls), Lugo called on the public to keep in mind that the system is "perverse." He was referring to election laws stipulating that, upon reaching 18 years of age (the legal voting age), citizens must voluntarily register, exactly the opposite of the process in the majority of countries in the region, where young people are automatically put on voter rolls when they reach 18 and there are even sanctions for not voting. Various sources said that nearly 1.5 million people who are eligible to vote are not registered.

The municipal elections had the feel of a punishment vote. The Colorados received 225,000 more votes than the Partido Liberal Revolucionario Auténtico (PLRA), the principal group in the coalition that brought Lugo to power. The PC emerged from the elections with 15 of the 18 provincial capitals and, perhaps most significantly, received a large majority of the votes in the interior of the country, where Lugo had handily won the presidential election.

In Departamento Centro, where half the 6.3 million registered voters live and where historically there has been parity between the party of Stroessner's heirs and the other traditional party,
the Partido Liberal (PL), the Colorados won 13 of 19 municipalities. But for Franco's presidential pretensions, the biggest blow was his brother's electoral trouncing by the Colorado candidate in Fernando de la Mora, the largest city in Departamento Central and the site of his family's estate.

As a consolation, the vice president can say that all the ministers involved in the municipal elections supported candidates who lost, without exception.

In sum, the Colorados surpassed the number of votes Lugo received in 2008. Most analysts attribute the victory largely to the effective work by the Colorado party apparatus and, above all, to an unprecedented outlay of campaign money. And that is where a new phenomenon appears.

**Out of defeat may come opportunity**

The Colorado leaders say that the person who made the victory possible was Horacio Cartes, a cigarette manufacturer who has been linked to drug trafficking. Colorado Sen. Diógenes Martínez said openly that "the narcos were the major funders of the campaign."

Although the weight falls on Martínez's own party, there is a reason for his sincerity: in a scenario in which the PC is divided between two candidates—former President Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) and former vice president Luis Castiglioni—Cartes is now reaping the rewards of the victory and asking to be the only PC presidential candidate in 2013.

It is this division within the Colorados that gives the government, despite its electoral defeat, an opening to a less adverse scenario. For Jorge Zárate, an analyst with ties to the Frente Guasú, "taking advantage of the divisions within the Colorados will allow Lugo to obtain agreements that until now were impeded by the solid opposition bloc. The numbers and the scenario are complex for the government, but given the necessary alliances with a Congress that is absolutely adverse, it is probable that some obstacles will begin to be removed with the new correlation of forces."

In any event, on Dec. 8, the president again warned his supporters of the dangers of the opposition's actions. In an interview with the Web site, Lugo said that "the risks of destabilization will always be latent when there is a political community the majority of whose leaders are not looking in the same direction, in the direction of democracy, and we cannot forget that today's coups are not like those of the last century. They are juridical coups, parliamentary coups, coups by power groups that maneuver day and night to avoid losing their privileges."

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