Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo to Relaunch Agrarian Reform

Andrés Gaudán

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo to Relaunch Agrarian Reform

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Paraguay
Published: Friday, February 25, 2011

Suffering from lymphoma, which is taking a serious toll on him, and harassed by the legislative and judicial branches, the Catholic Church, former allies who have jumped ship, and a bumbling but implacable opposition, Paraguay President Fernando Lugo is trying to retake the political initiative by refloating an agrarian-reform program that he has been unable to implement in his 30 months in office but dreams of executing in the 30 months remaining in his term. The reform is essential for his stability and to guarantee governability; it was his major campaign promise and the only one that can ensure support from the most dynamic sectors of society.

Against the political tidal wave led by the right and corporate agriculture, Lugo knows that he is playing his last cards in a game he is losing. Hence, on Dec. 8, 2010, he again warned Paraguayans that "the risk of a coup is always there," and, according to the ultraconservative daily , added that "coupstoday are not like those in the 1970s; now there are coupst by legal, parliamentary, economic, market, and power groups who are working day and night to avoid losing their privileges."

Church leader uses religious celebration to criticize

That same day, the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Caacupé, patron of Paraguay, was held. Because of his lymphoma, Lugo—a former Catholic bishop—was unable to travel the 50 km from the government palace to the shrine. However, at the celebration, along with tens of thousands of the faithful, were all the bishops in the country, the same bishops who do not forgive the president for having left the priesthood to serve the Paraguayan people from the political realm.

At the ceremony, Bishop Claudio Giménez spoke in his homily of the Catholic Church's concern about the "social insecurity that, if it continues to grow, threatens the stability of the government itself."

That was almost the same warning formulated by Lugo, but the Catholic Church blamed the ex-bishop for "what might happen."

In just one sentence, the bishop refereed to insecurity in general, "common crime, armed groups [a reference to the phantasmal and for most people nonexistent guerrilla group Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP)], kidnappings, and land invasions by some campesinos (NotiSur, May 14, 2010 )."

After condemning abortion and same-sex marriage and complaining that the number of children born outside of marriage has increased, Giménez again directed his remarks at the president. "Social insecurity grows under the eyes of an authority that seems complacent or ambiguous," he said.

The bishop's statements surely did not surprise Lugo. Every Sunday, one of his former clerical brothers gives a homily with an apocalyptic prediction. What might have been unexpected, however, was the announcement from the Partido Comunista (PC) that it was withdrawing its support "because the government has moved further to the right."
The PC is one of some twenty groups that are part of the Alianza Patriótica para el Cambio (APC), the ideologically broad-based coalition that brought Lugo to power in April 2008. Although it has no parliamentary representation, it has offered the government an active and unwavering militancy.

"By late 2009, the PC had warned of clear signs of a resurgent conservatism in the government, saying that such a resurgence could take on an anti-terrorist hue, aiding the offensive of US imperialism and helping it infiltrate the Ministerio del Interior [headed by Rafael Filizzola], the Fiscalía General, the judiciary, and the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores [under Héctor Lacognata]," read a PC communiqué.

The party said that in June 2010 it had published a document warning of "the intensification of the rightist tendency and, because of it, the need to relativize support and sharpen criticism, insisting on a militant stance to help reorient the government."

The party now says that "Lugo prefers governance among the elite, including setting aside ethics and justice," and it expressed regret that this year it is among the opposition. It was a resounding blow for Lugo.

And from the right

On Jan. 18, the Comisión Nacional de Refugiados (CONARE) decided to grant political asylum to Mario Cossio, former governor of the Bolivian state of Tarija, who is sought by Bolivian authorities on charges of corruption and human rights violations (NotiSur, July 4, 2008). CONARE knew that such a decision would damage Lugo's image, since he is a personal and political friend of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who had expressly asked that Cossio not be granted asylum since he is considered a common criminal in his home country.

CONARE includes representatives of the judiciary, the legislature, and the Ministerios de Relaciones Exteriores and Interior (Lacognata and Filizzola). Both the former Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) judges—some with professional or family ties to the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989)—as well as the deputies and senators of the Partido Colorado (Stroessner's party) put their chips on destabilizing the government and undermining relations between Lugo and Morales. What the president did not expect was that two of his ministers would join in betraying him.

The judicial body—judges and the CSJ—is very active in the destabilization campaign against the government. For example, they have jailed 40 militants and leaders of the Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Base en Lucha por la Reforma Agraria, campesinos—men and women—facing baseless accusations of belonging to the EPP. The campesinos were Lugo's first allies, they continue to be his fellow travelers, and they are going to try, along with the government, to rescue the agrarian reform program.

The legislature has behaved similarly and, in addition to having positions such as those of members of CONARE, passed a law last December against big tobacco that was the result of a number of crude amendments to the bill written by the administration. Lugo was forced to veto it.

"The measure passed by the two legislative branches does not contribute to achieving any of the objectives drawn up by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (TCTC) of the World Health Organization (WHO)," said the text of the veto decree. The bill finally approved by the senators and deputies provided, for example, that the prohibition against smoking in closed spaces as well as
that on tobacco advertising would be self-regulated by restaurant and bar owners and by cigarette manufacturers.

**Last hope for agrarian reform**

In this context, Lugo’s only option was to deploy a new strategy to accelerate agrarian reform, the pillar of the political platform that brought him to power. Although more than half the population lives in rural areas, most campesinos have no access to land, and their subsistence economy is threatened by the purchase or lease of large extensions for producing genetically modified (GM) soy.

Paraguay is the world's fourth-largest exporter of soy, and traditional agriculture sectors, linked to the Partido Colorado, oppose agrarian reform because they are trying to maintain their exemption from paying export fees, a privilege they enjoy in Uruguay, as well.

Many large estates () that the government hopes to include in the agrarian reform are the "ill-gotten lands" () given by Stroessner to Brazilian immigrants and businesses as part of his strategy to establish closer ties to the dictators during the 1964-1985 military rule in the neighboring country. A high percentage of national territory passed into the hands of the descendants of those adventurers who came from the east and who have come to be known as Brasiguayos.

Although on the surface it does not seem the best option, Eugenio Alonso, director of the Instituto de Desarrollo Rural y de la Tierra (INDERT), proposed to Lugo that members of the three branches of government—the executive, the judicial, and the legislative—hold a summit "to adjust and coordinate mechanisms for recovering lands that would be assigned to the agrarian-reform program."

Nothing could be farther from the interests of the legislators and judges. Alonso, as well as the president, is permanently in the eye of the hurricane, as a result of the destabilizing strategy devised by major media companies and sectors linked to agribusiness and the Partido Colorado. Not much is expected to come from the proposal.

Nevertheless, aware that it is walking through a minefield, the Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Base, which had been critical of the government, revised its position and gave complete backing to the political initiative retaken by Lugo. On Jan. 20, it supported Alonso’s proposal, despite recognizing that, for now, it is only a road map on which the best intentions are laid out."

The Coordinadora’s support is oxygen for the president: the organization represents some 80,000 families from 10 of the 17 Paraguayan departments.