Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo's Supporters Flirt with Re-Election Effort

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The decision of the Frente Gauzú—a minority and progressive group in President Fernando Lugo's governing coalition—to push for a constitutional amendment incorporating the possibility of presidential re-election, provoked a firestorm and forced all groups to define their position on an issue that, until then, had not been on anyone's political agenda.

To introduce a bill to amend the Constitution, the Frente Guazú (Frente Grande in Spanish) had to gather at least 30,000 signatures. In a country without a strong political tradition—Paraguay was ruled for 35 years by dictator Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989)—this allowed it to keep the public's interest.

The effort took place between May 31 and July 7, when a Senate committee decided to shelve the initiative. It was a short but turbulent time. In those five intense weeks, Lugo replaced two powerful members of his Cabinet, carried out a new purge in the leadership of the armed forces—the third since he took office in 2008—and had to deal with a new chapter in the ongoing struggle between landless campesinos and the Brazilian immigrants who have taken over a large part of rural Paraguay to cultivate soy. Against this backdrop, Lugo was compelled to put a limit on the Brazilian government's interference in Paraguay's internal affairs.

President Lugo not pushing for re-election

Interestingly, the only one who did not express an opinion on the FG initiative was President Lugo, who should have been the person most interested in the matter. The president never said that he aspired to another term, but he also never said that he would refuse if his bases asked him to run again. During the process, he only said, on two occasions, that he could not curtail the right of FG militants to take advantage of provisions to amend the Constitution.

Article 299 of the 1992 Constitution prohibits presidential re-election. At the time it was approved, just three years after the country emerged from the long night of dictatorship, Paraguayans wanted assurance that never again would an authoritarian regime be installed such as that headed by Stroessner.

However, two legal paths remained open for amending the Constitution, two ways in which the re-election prohibition could be changed. The first, long and complicated, would be by convoking a constituent assembly to draft a new Constitution. The second, quicker route is by the full Congress passing a constitutional amendment.

The signature gatherers opted for the second route, although they knew that they would never obtain the necessary votes in Congress. This raises the question of why they did it, and the answer perhaps lies in its motivating effect, in the political fervor that just the possibility of introducing the bill produced.
And, the signature-collecting campaign provided analysts with some useful information. The first item was that, apart from Lugo's final decision, Paraguayans found hope in the prospect that the former Catholic bishop might remain as head of state. That is the only way to understand how, in just 20 days, the FG—a small group with relatively few activists—managed to collect the necessary signatures—and then some. Although 30,000 signatures were required, they gathered more than 100,000.

Grudgingly, a Radio Nandutí commentator said in mid-June that people voluntarily approached the tables set up for signing the petitions.

For Lugo, who has been under debilitating treatment, following surgery, for lymphatic cancer for more than a year, this had an additional value, an encouragement whose true dimension only he could evaluate. It is not insignificant that, after the right shamelessly belittled his health problems, the people gave him such support.

**Opposition goes overboard in criticizing effort**

While society responded supportively, the opposition political leadership, business associations, and press uniformly reacted against the proposed reform, using language reminiscent of other times.

The Partido Colorado (Asociación Nacional Republicana, ANR/PC), Stroessner's party, maintained absolute silence. Its leaders insist that some polls indicate that, if elections were held today, the PC would obtain 40% support, more than enough to win any election, the first step to once again perpetuating itself in power. Therefore, the incorporation of a re-election clause could not hurt, but they left pushing that to others.

The Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), the most important party in the alliance that brought Lugo to power, has been divided for some time, not only on this matter but also regarding support for the president. Vice President Federico Franco, a member of the PLRA, does not hide his differences and has even shown destabilizing attitudes bordering on being pro-coup (NotiSur, Oct. 1, 2010).

When the Senate committee debated the FG proposal, most PLRA legislators voted against it. Beyond long-standing differences, perhaps what influenced them most was that in mid-June Lugo fired two PLRA Cabinet members, Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola and Public Works Minister Efrain Alegre. Both were possible presidential contenders from the right wing of the PLRA.

The two largest parties accompanied their criticism with denunciations of Lugo's supposed plans to stay in office by installing an authoritarian government, but the most absurd suggestions came from the smaller parties in Congress. The Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE), founded by coup leader Gen. Lino Oviedo (NotiSur, Nov. 9, 2007), accused Lugo of wanting to "impose a Soviet communist model" of government. Others called him a "Stalin imitator."

Nevertheless, the opponents who most often adopted politically passé language were the press and business groups. On June 18, an editorial in the daily commented on the attitude of PLRA president Blas Llano, who supported the re-election amendment and who did not criticize Lugo for firing Filizzola and Alegre. The editorial said, "The reactions of the principal [PLRA] party leaders are noteworthy, as if the scraps that they're given were enough to keep them subdued."

On June 20, accused the signature gatherers of being "passive accomplices in the assault on power being carried out by the Castro-communist and Bolivarian authorities."
The business leaders outdid everyone. On June 17, in a joint press release, the chambers that represent industrialists, rural producers, bankers, and large-scale merchants said, "President Lugo has personal ambitions and secondary desires," adding that, "if this attitude persists, the president will lead the country toward a confrontational scenario." They exhorted citizens to "stay alert in defending their way of life and the democratic institutions."

While Congress, the parties, and the press discussed re-election and the people voluntarily signed the FG's petitions, campesinos turned up the heat in their struggle for land. This time the target was the Brazilian landowners who grow soy—called Brasiguayos, because of their dual citizenship. The campesinos accuse the Brasiguayos of having appropriated public lands that should have been incorporated into the agrarian-reform program promised by Lugo during his electoral campaign (NotiSur, Nov. 7, 2008) and (July 16, 2010).

In early July, some 600 families occupied 40,000 hectares in Alto Paraná, east of the capital and near the border with Brazil. The land takeover was carried out as part of a campaign in which the campesinos are demanding 56,000 ha that Brazilian Tranquilino Favero, known in Paraguay as the "king of soy," is claiming are his. They demand that Favero produce legal documentation to prove his property rights.

The Brasiguayos responded in an almost military way, positioning their machinery on the sides of the road to enter the camps by force, and they gave the government an ultimatum to clear the lands of the squatters.

What should have been a conflict of interests became a state problem. The Brazilian government assumed an unequivocal defense of the Brasiguayos, without considering that normally those producers operate perilously close to illegality.

During a meeting of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) in Paraguay on June 29, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff expressed to Lugo her "interest and concern" about the soy-growers situation, reported the ANSA news agency, citing diplomatic sources.

On July 12, Lugo met with Brazil's Ambassador Eduardo dos Santos and Favero's lawyers, although no information was released regarding the content of the discussion.

On July 19, it was announced that, during the first half of August, a delegation of Brasilguayos would travel with dos Santos to Foz de Iguazú, a Brazilian city on the border with Paraguay, where they would meet with "high-ranking officials from Brasilia to look at the difficulties of their compatriots in Paraguay," said another ANSA report.

That same day, Paraguayan Minister of the Presidency Miguel López Perito wrote a new chapter in a story that no one knows how or when it will end. He said, "It is not appropriate for the Brazilian government to interfere in this matter because this is a matter of sovereignty and not a bilateral issue."

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