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Paraguay's De Facto Government Struggles at Home and Abroad

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Isolated internationally, and with qualified support from the same political parties that named Federico Franco to replace constitutional President Fernando Lugo following the Paraguayan Senate's legislative coup (NotiSur, July 13, 2012), Franco's de facto government obtained the support of José Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS).

At the same time, the regime implemented a strategy of rapprochement with certain military sectors, and, in the face of timid Catholic Church criticism, it was confronted by a progressive bishop who condemned its decision to allow the use of new genetically modified (GM) seeds, a hot-button issue in Paraguay that has led campesinos and indigenous to clash with the armed guards of large producers, especially growers of GM soy.

Meanwhile, as national and international complaints increased about the persecution of journalists who opposed the legislative coup, the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores said that it had received a verbal, but formal, request from Spain's conservative government that Franco not travel to Cádiz to participate in the XXII Ibero-American Summit to be held Nov. 16-17. Foreign Minister José Félix Fernández Estigarribia said that Spanish President Mariano Rajoy wants to ensure the success of the meeting and understands that Franco's presence immediately prompt several countries to cancel their attendance to show their repudiation of the Asunción regime.

Despite the situation that led both the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) and the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) to suspend Paraguay until democracy is restored, the OAS decided to install a permanent mission in Asunción to observe in situ the development of the process that began with the legislative coup on June 22.

OAS throws Franco regime a lifeline

During the Aug. 22 meeting of the OAS Permanent Council in Washington, DC, Insulza said that, in Paraguay, "political forces are operating quite normally...and, legally, the processes are taking their course." (Insulza was referring to legal actions presented by Lugo and the Frente Guasú, objecting to the grounds for and the course of the summary impeachment that, in 270 minutes, ended with the ouster of the constitutional president.) "That is why," added Insulza, "we think conditions are ripe for initiating a political dialogue leading to overcoming the strong division that provoked Lugo's removal."

On Sept. 19, Paraguayan analyst Celso Velázquez Oddone wrote on the independent Web site http://ea.com.py, "While all regional agencies and even the conservative Spanish government, a friend to Franco, question the legality of this regime, the OAS returned to its old anti-democratic practices, contrary to the interests of the hemisphere's societies, and threw a lifeline to the Franco dictatorship."

In his isolation (NotiSur, Aug. 31, 2012), Franco is trying to ingratiate himself with the country's factional powers but is not finding positive responses from either the press or the political parties.
that named him to replace Lugo. No one in Paraguay thinks about a traditional military coup, but the military still has influence in a country that lived under dictatorship from 1954 to 1989, the 35 years that Gen. Alfredo Stroessner was in power.

Franco appealed to the military. First, he allowed the Ministerio de Defensa to issue an order that dusted off a 1975 law prohibiting men who have not fulfilled their obligatory military service from obtaining a job. Later, he had to do an about-face following the negative reactions from even the parties that ousted the constitutional government.

Second, Franco fired the head of the armed forces (a constitutionalist general), replacing him with Gen. Miguel Christ Jacobs, who had agreed to stage a charade to accuse Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro of pressuring the military chiefs to actively defend Lugo. The day the Senate carried out the legislative coup, Maduro had traveled to Paraguay together with his counterparts from other UNASUR countries with the aim of mediating to stop the movement toward a coup. The appointment of Christ Jacobs set off a harsh debate because of his controversial request to buy nearly US$600 million worth of combat aircraft and armaments.

Franco confronts progressive bishop on GM seeds

On Sept. 6, Franco traveled 170 km south of Asunción, where the town of Villa Florida, surrounded by rich agricultural land, was celebrating the 130th anniversary of its founding. Franco attended a mass celebrated by Bishop Mario Melanio Medina, one of the few prelates who, at the time, spoke out against the June 22 coup. In his homily, the bishop asked the government to reverse its decision to "promote the use of GM seeds that the multinationals want to force on us." Medina was referring to Monsanto, which days before had benefitted from a presidential decree allowing the introduction into the country of the genetically modified Bt RR cottonseed, whose use had not been authorized by Lugo.

Franco, a practicing Catholic, interrupted the homily, went to the pulpit, criticized the bishop's remarks, and almost shouted at him, saying, "If you have any proof at all that [genetically modified crops] are going to harm health or the environment, give it to me." Later that day, Franco accused Medina of being linked to the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), a shadowy guerrilla group that few people believe exists and which is supposedly involved in kidnapping rural producers for ransom (NotiSur, May 14, 2010, and Feb. 25, 2011).

On his Twitter account, Franco wrote, "Why does Bishop Medina feign ignorance of the EPP? Please, bishop, you are a man of the church!" In a new message immediately afterward, he added, "Transgenics are more important to Bishop Medina than the EPP. Comprehensive lesson, fellow Paraguayans. Viva Paraguay!"

The extraordinary plenary meeting of the Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya (CEP) did not defend or express solidarity with Bishop Medina, but on Sept. 18, in a document sent to the heads of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, in which it admitted that the country was in a delicate situation as a result of Lugo's ouster, the CEP criticized planting GM seeds. In this regard, it recommended following existing law—passed under the Lugo administration—regarding the use of "technological and chemical products that endanger the health, the food supply, and the life of persons and cause forced migration from the country to the city, with serious social consequences."
Besides the section on "equitable sustainable development," the CEP document addresses other points, among them an explicit request that the government review its contracts with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that promote what it defines as "gender ideology." For the bishops, gender policies "endanger the heterosexual education of children and adolescents;" therefore, and this makes it "necessary to block laws based on ambiguities."

Days earlier, on Aug. 31, the CEP had apologized for having called for Lugo's resignation. The request that the president step down, said the bishops, "was based on news about imminent bloodshed. The CEP wanted to avoid a deadly confrontation among siblings."

In the following days, criticism, all coming from abroad, accelerated regarding the dismissal of public-media journalists who had defended institutionality when the Senate ousted Lugo. The Federación Latinoamericana de Periodistas (FELAP), the professional associations of MERCOSUR countries, and Reporteros sin Fronteras denounced what they called a "purge."

Thirty-one journalists have already been fired from state radio stations and TV channels, and at least five programs have been taken off the air, among them Micrófono Abierto, a short five-minute daily program that featured opinions from anonymous citizens on the most diverse issues and that had become the most popular program on public television.

Amid this wave of criticism, on Sept. 17, Foreign Minister Fernández Estigarribia said that the Spanish Secretary of State for International Cooperation and Ibero-America Jesús Gracia, during a recent visit to the country, told him of the Rajoy government's concern about Franco's participation at the Ibero-American Summit in Cádiz. "Gracia told me that Franco's presence could cause other presidents to stay away," said the foreign minister.

In mid-July, in Lima, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo had given the first signal that the Paraguayan regime's international isolation was not just among UNASUR and MERCOSUR countries. "If the situation does not improve rapidly, it is likely that Paraguay will not be able to attend the Cádiz summit. I think that that would be better for Paraguay, for Spain, and for the group of countries that are going to be there," he said. Spain had been the first European state to recognize the regime established in Paraguay after the ouster of the democratic government.

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