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Paraguay's Politics Heats Up Ahead of 2013 Presidential Elections

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The coup that toppled the democratic government of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012) and installed Federico Franco as de facto head of state (NotiSur, July 13, 2012) has accelerated the electoral calendar, revealing the ambitions and needs of some and the political immaturity of others.

The former group includes the traditional Partido Colorado (Asociación Nacional Republicana, ANR) of the late dictator Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989); the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), a key player in the overthrow scheme despite governing with Lugo for 46 months; the Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE), headed by pro-coup Gen. Lino Oviedo; and the Partido Patria Querida (PPQ), which represents powerful agroindustry sectors. They need to indulge their top leaders' cravings for power, and they need to extricate the country from its international isolation by adhering to the institutional timeline, which calls for presidential elections on April 21, 2013.

The second group is basically the Frente Guasú (FG), an alliance of 19 parties and social movements originally led by Lugo. Although its leadership knows that without the former president as a candidate—an unconstitutional option—its electoral hopes are diminished, it presented its worst face to society, and, rather than working for the long term to build a solid political alternative, it also jumped into the electoral fray and failed, initiating a process that perhaps cannot be reversed.

Franco is definitively out of the running and will have to be satisfied with being de facto president for 10 months, until, following the April elections, he turns over power to one of the leaders who used him to stage the June 22 coup (NotiSur, Aug. 31, 2012). Meanwhile, he continues to serve the interests of Paraguay's four rightist parties and, almost daily, must endure the small but significant acts of repudiation from social activists who wait for him at any public event that he participates in.

Leaders in Franco's own party denounce him for supposed or real acts of corruption. With the aim of creating some support for his administration, he promotes a dangerous nationalism that, rather than achieving what he needs and is looking for, divides society and accentuates the regime's international isolation.

Analyst Eduardo Arce says, "Within the vanguard of the political alliance that made his imposition in the government possible, Franco sees the slow but progressive departure of his friends, obligated by their interests in the electoral campaign. Before year's end, Colorados and Oviedistas will be a formidable opposition."

Franco beats drum of nationalism

After being hit with criticism for appointing several relatives to strategic positions where important resources are managed, Franco was accused of grossly increasing his personal wealth, which was US$147,000 in 2008 when he assumed the vice presidency and today exceeds US$1.1 million. The
figures are taken from the sworn statement of assets that he filed with the Contraloría General when he replaced Lugo. The information came out in a investigative report, and, on Oct. 11, Franco had to call a press conference to say that "there was a mistake" in drawing up the documentation that he gave the Contraloría.

Days before, on Sept. 20, Carlos Amarilla, governor of the Departamento Central, which includes the capital Asunción, said in an interview with Radio Cardinal that most national legislators had received a US$10,000 bribe to vote against a bill to reorganize the transit system. Amarilla said the "cynicism" of his fellow PLRA members and the president was surprising. "They received the money, and now they threaten to sue me," he said.

The governor also said that, after the first decree authorizing planting transgenic seeds from multinational Monsanto, Franco signed another—Decreto 9.699—in secret, eliminating the requirement to file an environmental-impact study and giving the Ministerio de Agricultura full autonomy to decide on the introduction of new genetically modified organisms (NotiSur, Sept. 28, 2012).

In this context, and isolated internationally, with its membership in regional organizations suspended because of the overthrow of the democratic government, the de facto regime opted to promote nationalism with the aim of coalescing an internal front. Since Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay provisionally suspended Paraguay from the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and all South American countries did the same in the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), Franco has said that Paraguay is a victim of "the new Triple Alliance."

The term refers to the genocidal invasion of Paraguay by those three countries between 1864 and 1870, which ended with the death of 90% of Paraguay's male population—including children—and the destruction of its economic model.

On Sept. 22, in a ceremony commemorating the 1866 Battle of Curupaity—the most important victory by Paraguayan troops during that war—hundreds of children paraded in military uniforms with toy weapons "that they made." That act was highlighted when Minister of Education Horacio Galeano Perrone stood and applauded, at Franco's side, as the youngsters passed by the dignitaries' box.

The same day, Franco agreed to a request by Oviedista Deputy José López to increase the military budget because of an imaginary "danger of a Bolivian incursion." Paraguay has not gone to war with its neighbor Bolivia since the 1932-1935 Chaco War.

On Oct. 2, Galeano Perrone again took up the theme, complaining in the Asunción daily ABC Color that the Bolivian government was refusing to allow Paraguayan youth to participate in the Olimpiada Iberoamericana de Matemáticas. He said, "I ordered the delegation to go and, if it is refused entrance, to parade with our tricolor [red, white, and blue] flag in front of the Universidad Mayor de San Simón" in Cochabamba. The Bolivian government had never made such a decision, and the Paraguayan youth participated in the competition together with young people from 19 Latin American countries, Spain, and Portugal.

Even some on the right are concerned about these attempts to foment a dangerous feeling of rejection toward other Latin American countries. On Oct. 18, former President Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) said that, with Lugo's ouster, "we're returning to the worst conservatism. It's as if we were living in the Cold War, seeing communists everywhere, developing a neurotic obsession
with Presidents Evo Morales [Bolivia] and Hugo Chávez [Venezuela], saying that the two are allied to destroy Paraguay." Duarte Frutos is a longtime leader of the Partido Colorado.

Five days later, on Oct. 23, Juan Carlos Cabezudo, a founder and legal representative of the PPQ, resigned from the party. "The day of the coup, the PPQ opted to climb aboard a ship of pirates and opportunists. To overthrow a constitutional president in an all-out historic process of democratic change, it preferred a rusty machete to a surgical scalpel. The party leaders justified their actions by predicting a communist apocalypse that did not happen in the last four years and is not going to happen," said Cabezudo.

"We are witnessing the degradation of politics," said analyst Alfredo Boccia in his column in the daily Última Hora.

In this climate, it was not surprising when, on Oct. 7, Gen. Oviedo said he was ready to kill those "who betray me." German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) reported that the general said that, "on election day, he would gather his people in party headquarters, hand out between US $100 and US$400, and give them something to eat before going to vote." The agency added, "Oviedo said that he has the formula to know how his people vote, and, if anyone betrays him, he will apply the guasu api, a Guaraní expression meaning "shoot and hide."

Left splinters

Although without resorting to violence or formulating apocalyptic predictions, the FG got into the electoral game that the right proposed when it toppled Lugo. In the midst of the debate to choose the FG presidential candidate, the Partido Encuentro Nacional (PEN) announced on Oct. 8 that it was withdrawing from the FG. The next day, Mario Ferreiro—a successful TV host who had the support of most groups within the FG to be its candidate—left the alliance and, taking 11 parties and groups with him, founded Concertación Ciudadana y Popular under whose banner he will run in April.

"The serious mistake," as Eduardo Arce called it, was not made with a single action but began to develop after the November 2010 municipal elections. Many leaders thought at the time that the FG could be a major political player, and "from that point on everything came down to making electoral calculations. In taking that path the alliance collaborated so that the electoral contest would open with high expectations," said Arce.

The analyst says, "That [November 2010] was the moment to take the time necessary to consolidate an ideologically solid party. It was the time to create a durable instrument, to strengthen social organizations—unions, campesino, indigenous, youth and neighborhood groups—and leftist policies to encourage popular mobilization."

The left's political inexperience got it into a dangerous game that had another step. It had to choose a candidate, and six were vying. Today, the FG is going through its worst time because, in addition, sectors that broke off are also breaking apart, and some of them, like the PEN, are now negotiating with the PLRA coup leaders to create a common presidential ticket ahead of April 2013.

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