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Paraguay Looks Ahead to Presidential Elections

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In three months, Paraguay will hold a presidential election, called by the de facto regime to clean up its image. The regime was deeply damaged internationally by the hasty June 22, 2012, coup, in which all political parties participated, that toppled the constitutional, democratic government of President Fernando Lugo (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

Paraguayans already know, however, that on April 21 the country will turn back the clock to the first half of the 20th century and again have a head of state from the Alianza Nacional Republicana (ANR), better known as the Partido Colorado (PC). The party governed Paraguay for more than 60 years, including during the bloody 35-year dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989).

Barring a political tsunami, businessman Horacio Cartes will win the election. Multiple accusations and testimonies allege that Cartes amassed his fortune and "paid for" his recent full-bore entrance into politics with proceeds from money laundering and smuggling.

In any event, from an ethical and moral perspective, citizens have no winning options since the only candidates who are irreproachable in that regard are Lugo's heirs. But his movement is split between two candidates with little political history—Ánibal Carrillo and Mario Ferreiro—who are also immersed in a degrading fight for party positions and have no possibility of repeating the great leap toward democracy that took place on Aug. 15, 2008, when the former Catholic bishop was inaugurated president.

The city's walls are covered with campaign posters, and candidates speak on radio and television every day. It is even rumored that in more than one case candidates have paid significant sums of money to get their photographs on the front page of some newspaper. The political platforms of the candidates are unknown, even in general terms.

Startling admission by congressional candidate

"Here everyone knows that, for the country to progress, the issue of land ownership must be dealt with, but even though the campesinos and indigenous who are demanding parcels make up a large electoral group, no one wants to make promises that they will never be able to keep," said Daniel Durán, a candidate for deputy. "It is easier to take advantage of their poverty and go to the communities and buy their vote. In the Partido Colorado, we all do it, it is no secret, and the other parties do it as well. Votes are bought, judges are bought, here in Paraguay, everything is bought. Money solves everything."

Duran said, "It's always been like this," adding that the offers for April 21 "will be very strong because this year Horacio Cartes will be cutting deals."

In statements to Radio Cardinal on Dec. 13, Durán admitted with honesty unprecedented among party leaders that "the offers will be concentrated in the poorest areas, where the votes will be cheaper but where there will be a lot of competition. Few are in charge of that effort; it has to be people who are very much involved in the communities. First, their price must be met, they will be the intermediaries, and that is where the competition will be brutal."
Aside from his unexpected confession, Durán was right when he said that land ownership is an essential issue in Paraguay (NotiSur, Feb. 17, 2012). Estimates put the number of landless campesinos at between 74,000 and 300,000. In addition, a high but unspecified number of indigenous have been displaced and are surviving today on the roadsides, far from their lands, without work possibilities, although in theory the Constitution says those lands belong to them and are therefore guaranteed them.

Article 64 of the national Constitution establishes that "indigenous peoples have the right, as communities, to a shared ownership of a piece of land, which will be sufficient in size and quality for them to preserve and develop their own lifestyles. The state will provide them with the respective land free of charge. This land, which will not be subject to attachment, cannot be divided, transferred, or affected by the statute of limitations, nor can it be used as collateral for contractual obligations or leased. It will also be exempt from taxes." Not even Lugo could comply with what was called for in Article 64.

In addition to not benefitting from land redistribution, campesinos and indigenous are being persecuted. On Nov. 23, 2012, in the eastern department of Alto Paraná on the border with Argentina and Brazil, 170 members of the Avá-Guarani indigenous group in Villa Ibatim were evicted thanks to an irregular judicial order carried out by 400 police with heavy weapons.

Supporting Durán's allegations, Claudio Rolón, an activist from the Plataforma de Organizaciones Sociales por la Democracia, told Radio Ñandutí that soy growers from the region paid judges to order the evictions. Each order cost US$100,000, he said.

Lugo, who did not have his own political organization in 2008, was elected thanks to an alliance with the Partido Liberal Revolucionario Auténtico (PLRA), while he contributed the backing of the social organizations that wanted to see him elected, basically the campesinos and indigenous. But decisive in his victory was his principal campaign promise to carry out agrarian reform.

**Right worked long and hard to oust Lugo**

Until Lugo was ousted, the main task of the political right and the rural business class was to cause friction between Lugo and his base, and to do so, it was essential to prevent Lugo from starting to correct the land-tenancy structure. To thwart Lugo's efforts, the opposition had to see that the administration lacked the resources to buy land that could then be given to campesinos.

Congress sunk all of Lugo's plans. For example, deputies and senators approved a tax on earnings to increase the budget for agrarian reform, but they decided that implementation would not begin until mid-2012, that is, when Lugo was no longer in office.

It is clear that the right worked from the beginning to ensure that it would never again risk having another Lugo as president. We might say that the task is done, because the right also saw to it that the Frente Guasú (FG)—the "Luguista" political structure—became divided, that many of its militants left, disillusioned, and that Carrillo and Ferreiro are today a mere vestige of what the FG was.

With Lugo no longer on the scene, although he is running for a Senate seat, the first stage of the right's plan is complete. Now, it remains to be seen how the future plays out and who will control the government. Of those candidates with any possibilities, Cartes ranks first. A poll by independent consulting firm Gabinete de Estudio y Opinión (GEO) showed that, if elections were
held the day the poll was taken, the PC candidate would capture 38.7% of the vote, followed in second place by Efraín Alegre of the PLRA with 31.1%. Former Gen. Lino Oviedo of the Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE) would come in third with 5.2%, and, in fourth place would be Miguel Carrizosa of Patria Querida, the candidate of the powerful bankers and industrialists, whose support in the poll was only 2.1%.

Leading candidates offer few alternatives
To understand in depth the Paraguayan drama, it is necessary to know who the players are who dominate the political scene.

Cartes is what his opponents call a "political upstart." And a democracy upstart, they might add, since he only became active in the PC in 2010, when he formed an internal faction called Honor Colorado. Before that, he was so disengaged from the country's internal issues that, according to Registro Cívico Permanente documents, he did not vote in any of the five elections since the end of the dictatorship in 1989. At the age of 56, he will vote for the first time in his life on April 21.

Lugo blamed Cartes for financing the coup that ousted him and described Cartes as "the figure of narco-Coloradismo." Cartes responded by justifying the coup, saying, "What happened is that we were living with a model that did not respect the customs of Paraguayans."

Cartes studied in the US, and before he turned 30 started an exchange bureau (casa de cambio), which Stroessner quickly authorized to operate as a bank, the Banco Amambay (NotiSur, May 11, 2012). US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2011 said Banco Amambay laundered money for powerful Paraguayan mafias engaged in drug trafficking and smuggling. To his business holdings, Cartes later added tobacco (Tabacalera del Este), alcohol and soft drinks, cattle raising, and even soccer (Club Libertad in the capital Asunción). One document released by WikiLeaks said that Banco Amambay launders 80% of the dirty money in Paraguay and that Cartes "is being watched by the [US] Drug Enforcement Administration."

Alegre was minister of public works in the Lugo administration, until the president fired him for "misappropriation of public resources." His successor, Cecilio Pérez Bordón, said that "Alegre left the ministry coffers practically empty." The Asunción daily La Nación quantified that emptying at US$20 million, money that ended up in foreign bank accounts and was used to "carry out with state money a newspaper, radio, and TV campaign to enhance his image ahead of the 2013 elections."

Oviedo is a long-time participant in questionable political and criminal events. He fled the country in 1996, following an aborted coup against President Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993-1998) of the Colorado (NotiSur, May 3, 1996). Oviedo was legally banned from holding public office (NotiSur, Sept. 26, 1997) and accused of ordering the 1999 assassination of Vice President Luis María Argaña (Colorado) and a massacre of civilians that same year (NotiSur, March 26, 1999, and April 9, 1999). He was absolved in all cases by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) between 2007 and 2008 (NotiSur, Nov. 9, 2007), at the end of the administration of former President Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008), the last Colorado president before Lugo was elected.

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