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Paraguay's Partido Colorado Likely to Return to Power in Upcoming Elections

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Category/Department: Paraguay

Published: 2013-03-29

On April 21, ten months after the June 22, 2012, coup that toppled democratically elected President Fernando Lugo and installed the de facto government of Federico Franco (NotiSur, July 13, 2012), Paraguayans will return to the ballot boxes. They will do so with the certainty that the Partido Colorado (Asociación Nacional Republicana, PC), in power from 1947 to 2008, including throughout the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), will return to power and that the new president will be Horacio Cartes. Cartes is a powerful businessman with no political past but with alleged links to the smuggling, drug trafficking, and laundering money of the mafias. Moreover, this will be the first time in his life that the 56-year-old Cartes will vote (NotiSur, Jan. 18, 2013).

The Franco government refused to give diplomatic guarantees to a Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) election observer team. The permanent electoral observation group set up last October by the Organization of American States (OAS) said that the democratic process is proceeding smoothly.

The social climate, however, is tense. Since September 2012, three well-known campesino leaders have been murdered—the latest on Feb. 19—and rural workers organizations accuse the large soy growers and multinational mining interests of being the intellectual authors and hiring assassins to kill their top leaders.

Polling firms and principal political leaders say the only question is whether Cartes will obtain a large enough legislative majority to govern without having to negotiate with other political forces, except in those cases that constitutionally require a special majority.

Until late January, the polls, conducted every two weeks, agreed that the Colorado candidate would obtain between 36% and 39% of the vote. That majority, while comfortable, would not be "absolute." But, on Feb. 2, former Gen. Lino Oviedo, founder and leader of the Unión Nacional de Ciudaddanos Éticos (UNACE), died in a helicopter accident, which could change the outlook enough to make Cartes' dream of capturing more than 50% of the vote a reality.

Caudillo's Death Changes Race

Exactly 23 years earlier, on Feb. 2, 1989, grenade in hand, the then colonel known for his diminutive stature—he was just 1.62 meters tall (5' 3")—entered the government palace to announce to Stroessner that he had just been overthrown and that he would be replaced by another general, Andrés Rodríguez.

During another February, in 2002, Oviedo left the Partido Colorado and founded UNACE (NotiSur, July 26, 2002), which he led with such an iron fist that he left no obvious successor. His followers were ex-Colorados, leading many analysts to surmise that they might return to their roots and vote for Cartes.
Oviedo's votes are a treasure coveted by all. But this 11% to 15% of the electorate, now orphaned and without a candidate—a sector that sociologists identify with the most extreme marginality—can be won over by only Cartes or Efraín Alegre, candidate for the Partido Liberal Revolucionario Auténtico (PLRA), the group that betrayed Lugo and sealed the democratic fate of Paraguay.

Cartes, because of UNACE's Colorado origins and because the Colorados have a party apparatus that knows how to maneuver among the marginalized by using their policies of handing out perks. Alegre, because he was negotiating with Oviedo until the day of the fatal accident, not to merge their two tickets but to ensure a good and equitable division of Cabinet posts. Analysts believe that the Colorados will find it easier than the PLRA to win over UNACE voters in this final phase of the campaign.

Alianza Patriótica para el Cambio (APC), the coalition that, with the former Catholic bishop Lugo, pulled off the miracle in 2008 that ended 60 years of Colorado rule (NotiSur, April 25, 2008), no longer exists. Following the coup, personal ambitions flourished. The PLRA, which had been the APC's major supporter, first backed the coup and then, to satisfy Alegre's ambitions, made him its candidate.

The progressive political and social sectors that accompanied Lugo split, leaving two factions that polls show are so insignificant that they will probably not win enough votes to have legislative standing. One faction is maintained by Frente Guasú, whose candidate is the medical doctor Aníbal Carrillo Iramain; the other is the newly created Avanza País, under the leadership of popular TV commentator Mario Ferreiro.

"Paraguay is again a country without prospects," wrote a blogger on the alternative Web site Viento Fuerte who uses only his initials (JBRC) but who has many followers.

**Campesino leaders targeted**

As if to prove the blogger right, just 24 hours after the formal opening of the electoral campaign, Benjamín Lezcano, a prominent campesino leader, was shot and killed in front of his neighbors. The crime, which occurred in Concepción department on the border with Brazil, sent multiple messages to Paraguayan society.

Rural workers organizations and residents of the region, where financial activities and agricultural production are dominated by Brasiguayos—Brazilian citizens who have adopted Paraguayan nationality (NotiSur, Feb. 17, 2012)—said the killing was "a new attempt to quash social protests," adding that the murder could have been ordered by groups linked to large soy growers or to interests allied with British-Australian multinational Rio Tinto, which is installing a large aluminum plant in the area (NotiSur, Aug. 31, 2012). Residents reject both soy planting with transgenic seeds and the mining operation because of the activities' environmental risks.

Lezcano was killed in Arroyito, 380 km north of Asunción. Two persons arrived at the door of his house, and in broad daylight and in front of other campesino leaders, riddled his body with 17 bullets from a Belgian-made FAL (Fusil Automatique Légar), used only by state security forces or groups tied to drug traffickers.

Lezcano's death brings to three the social activists murdered in recent months—129 since 1989, when Stroessner was overthrown—and suspicions always point in the same direction: assassins contracted by large rural producers.
A communiqué signed by a dozen campesino organizations said that the crime "shows the irrepressible desire to crush social protest," adding that Lezcano's stance "against the use of transgenic seeds and against the transnational Rio Tinto's installation of an enormous aluminum smelter" was well-known. The text, which was not carried in the major media—denounced "state terrorism that allows situations like this to continue." In September and December 2012, in similar circumstances, Mariano Jara and Vidal Vega, also campesino activist leaders, were murdered.

As has become standard practice with the 129 murders since 1989, authorities attempted to reduce the crimes to internecine struggles among campesinos and more recently to actions by the illusory Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP). The EPP is a supposed guerrilla group that, "if it existed," in the words of former interior minister Rafael Filizzola—now distanced from Lugo and the vice presidential candidate on the PLRA ticket—"would be made up of no more than 15 persons" dedicated to kidnapping rural property owners for ransom. To date only one such case is known, that of rancher Fidel Zabala.

In Lezcano's case, it was simply a police agent saying, "For me, the EPP killed him," that became the major media's source for reporting that the EPP killed the campesino leader.

Workers organizations and radio commentator Francisco Jara of station Ka'avy Poty say Lezcano "was murdered by assassins who acted on behalf and on the orders of Brasiguayo soy growers." The journalist said that the large plantation owners' power "has no limits, we need only recall that campesinos caught Mariano Jara's killers, but the police immediately let them go, without any legal actions being taken."

While Paraguay has been a veritable field laboratory for cultivating genetically modified (GM) seeds produced by multinational Monsanto, former President Lugo had opposed planting new varieties. He had also delayed authorizing the installation of the Rio Tinto aluminum plant, demanding an environmental-impact study. Just days after the June 22 coup, Franco signed resolutions authorizing the mining company's installation and the entry into the country of the latest generation of transgenic cotton, corn, and soy seeds launched by Monsanto on the world market.

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