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Andrés Gaudán

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With President Horacio Cartes, the Partido Colorado Returns to Power in Paraguay

by Andrés Gaudín
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For some, Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes' inauguration on Aug. 15 opened a new chapter in the country. For others, the ceremony marked the return to the worst form of politics, exemplified by the Partido Colorado (PC, Asociación Nacional Republicana, ANR), Cartes' party and the party that for 35 years gave civil support to dictator Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). Cartes' signing, within a week of being sworn in, a law that authorized using the military against social protests, as well as the events on inauguration day and the initial statements by his ministers, seem to support those who looked with pessimism on the return of "Coloradismo."

The day the party returned to power, Cartes symbolically traveled the 300 meters separating the Congress building—where he took the oath of office—from the government palace—where he installed his Cabinet—in a 1969 Chevrolet Caprice, used frequently by Stroessner to transport close visitors. Stroessner used it to ferry, from the airport to his residence, Gens. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1979) of Chile, Humberto Castelo Branco (1964-1967) and Arturo da Costa e Silva (1967-1969) of Brazil, Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981) of Argentina, and Gregorio Álvarez of Uruguay (1981-1985), the dictators who took the first steps to form Operación Condor, the Southern Cone's coordinated repression of dissidents (NotiSur, Feb. 16, 1993, and March 4, 2011). The same white convertible was also used to transport US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. "I will use it proudly," said Cartes, listening to the motor hum.

Cartes won the April elections without proposing a government program and still has not done so (NotiSur, March 29, 2013, and May 10, 2013). He did formulate some general guidelines: He will not impose any tax on agricultural exports—in the last four years, the sector, to which Cartes is closely tied, has had the best economic performance, earning US$9.4 billion, more than triple the foreign debt of US$2.6 billion and more than its total earnings in the previous four years; he will implement a program of privatizations; and he will be tough in confronting social protests.

Cartes has vast business interests, no public-service record
The new president does not cultivate relationships based on ideas and has never favored political compromise. He has always moved in the world of business and sports. His life has not been geared toward public service, and he did not even vote until he was 57 years old. The declaration of assets that he filed on Aug. 22 showed that he has 23 businesses of various kinds (finance, tobacco, cattle, sports, air transport), among which the most prominent are Banco Amambay, Tabacalera del Este, Consignataria de Ganado, Sporting Life, Club Libertad de Fútbol, and Aero Centro. This array of interests, along with several incidents denounced by the Brazil daily O Globo, link Cartes with cigarette smuggling and money laundering for the country's criminal organizations.

Cartes will clearly have a hard-line administration and will not allow campesinos, the most active and organized social sector, to protest freely. To manage that within a formal legal framework, he urged Congress to pass a law that authorizes, by decree and without legislative consultation,
sending troops to regions where the demand for land is constant, basically the northeastern departments.

For the past 15 years, to justify repression, the right has conjured up appearances by a supposed guerrilla group (NotiSur, May 14, 2010), the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP). This time was no exception. Cartes and his team devised an escalation that began a week before he took office. On Aug. 8, the major media reported bomb threats in the Congress building and warned that "EPP attacks are feared on the day of Cartes' inauguration."

On Aug. 17, five security guards were massacred on a rural estate in the department of San Pedro. The incident was attributed to the EPP, and on Aug. 18 a supposed communiqué was made public in which the group claimed responsibility for the massacre. On Aug. 20, Cartes sent Congress a bill to authorize the use of the military to quell protests, and, by Aug. 22, it had become the Ley de Defensa Nacional y Seguridad Interno, the first law of the new administration.

During the very brief debate on the bill in Congress, Colorado Sen. Luis Castiglioni said, "This legal tool is necessary to urgently combat the criminal group [the EPP], because otherwise it will spread to the capital and other cities."

The progressive Adolfo Ferreiro asked, "What is this EPP for which the military forces must be mobilized? The executive's request exceeds all political dimension because at the same time they tell us that the EPP consists of 20 crazy militants supported by some starving campesinos."

The Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos (CODEHUPY) opposed the bill and said that, although 131 campesino leaders had been assassinated since 1990, the judiciary, the police, and the military had not been mobilized."

On Aug. 23, the Army put a price tag on its participation in the repression: "To sustain the action will require an extraordinary appropriation," which it estimated at some US$450,000.

**EPP, real or imaginary, here to stay**

Sen. Ferreiro said that clearly, beyond any real or imaginary existence, the EPP—or at least the initials EPP—has been incorporated onto the national stage and will be a starring actor in the right's return to government, and that would not be anything new. Despite never having had a confrontation with the Army, despite the lack of any document laying out its philosophy or explaining its objectives, and despite no one so far providing accurate information on how it is financed or how many members it has, since 1998, the right and the rightist media have insisted that the supposed Ejército Paraguayo del Pueblo is public enemy number one.

Journalist Antonio Vera says that, after a nebulous beginning, and following some kidnappings of landowners and the occasional death of a police officer or civilian, "the right's propaganda arsenal has been occupied with attributing such actions to the EPP but without presenting verifiable proof, which has given rise to the hypothesis that the story of guerrillas could be, in reality, actions by a criminal organization set up in the world of drug trafficking and smuggling with the aim of collecting money, destabilizing the country, and weakening the government to, in the end, justify a foreign intervention."

Vera's theory has some basis in fact. In the years since the overthrow of ex-President Fernando Lugo (2010-2012), and in a decision forced by the right after one of the phantom EPP incidents, Paraguay
has an agreement by which Colombia provides it with police training. And several reports indicate that, some months ago, Cartes contracted Israeli security experts, who also have been put in charge of designing an anti-terrorist plan.

Also, just after taking office, Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas said that it might be necessary "to ask the US government for help." De Vargas has experience in such things, since, in his former post as anti-drugs chief, he maintained permanent contact with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

This new reality that began with the return of the Partido Colorado has caused uneasiness in political and social sectors that ask how far this government is capable of going in the face of an enemy that is identified only by its three initials. Throughout its supposed existence, said Vera, the EPP has not carried out any revolutionary action. On the contrary, the actions attributed to it always serve as a pretext to repress landless-campesino organizations, which periodically demonstrate against large soy producers.

Analyst Paulo López ventures a dangerous explanation—intimated by Vera—saying that the denunciations of supposed EPP actions serve to provide cover for sectors that, one way or another, have always been linked to one or more of the 23 businesses owned by Cartes.

"Since the existence of the EPP was announced," López wrote in the online daily E'A, "they say that all the country's ills are caused by that terrible guerrilla organization. No one shows proof of its existence, but everything that happens is immediately labeled as a new criminal action by the subversives. This happens with every kidnapping of a landowner or attack on a police officer or police post in whatever area of the country, especially in the northeastern departments—the now militarized Concepción and San Pedro—a territory occupied by the mafias trafficking in drugs, people, vehicles, machinery, tobacco and cigarettes, and raw lumber. Signs abound that lead one to suppose that the violence is a product not of any guerrilla action but of the settling of scores among the leaders of those mafias closely linked to money laundering."

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