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Paraguayans Protest Corruption

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Paraguayan corruption born in 1887

With some irony and a lot of truth, Paraguayans date political corruption in their country from Sept. 11, 1887, the founding date of the Asociación Nacional Republicana (ANR) a political party that mutated over time into what today is the Partido Colorado (PC). After that "birth date," they say corruption became an institutionalized practice.

Contemporary corruption, which inspired the unprecedented popular uprising that led to the ouster of two legislators, has more recent roots. Many analysts cite the Aug. 15, 2013, inauguration of President Horacio Cartes as a beginning ([NotiSur], May 10, 2013, and Sept. 6, 2013). What is certain is that from that moment on tales of corruption, usually connected to illegal use of public funds and cases of nepotism and political cronyism, began to circulate with increasing frequency. Analysts have not, however, explained why citizen reaction to this longtime, deeply rooted practice has been so virulent precisely at the beginning of the mandate of a president elected with 46% of the votes.

Numerous complaints forced the Senate to listen to public clamor. On Nov. 15, it considered a legal request to lift the immunity of Colorado Sen. Víctor Bogado, a member of the inner circle close
to President Cartes. The prosecution accused him of putting two women on the payroll without requiring them to work. One was his children’s nanny who received a combined salary of US$4,000 a month for positions as legal parliamentary advisor and technician for the Paraguayan-Brazilian hydroelectric plant at Itaipú. The amount is considered quite high in Paraguay where the minimum wage is US$370 per month. The other case involved a former beauty queen who was paid US$1,900 by the Senate for unspecified duties.

The day the Senate considered lifting Bogado’s immunity, 23 of the 45 senators supported him, preventing legal action against him. In an immediate response, thousands of people took to the streets of Asunción and marched to Congress where they piled up hundreds of rolls of toilet paper in protest. In a country where street protest is not common, demonstrations against the senators who supported Bogado continued with increasing intensity.

No one imagined that US Ambassador James Thessin would weigh in on the corruption issue. On Nov. 20, Asunción dailies ABC Color and La Nación quoted the US diplomat as telling legislators that "people who fail to meet ethical standards, who receive bribes, who rob the government and the people, or those who disrespect the dignified role of being a public servant should be held accountable and suffer the consequences of their actions."

Businesses shun "corrupt" officials

Another thing no one imagined would happen was that senators who had backed Bogado became an object of public repudiation. Within hours of the Senate action, major stores in Asunción and other cities joined the rejection of the 23 legislators who had closed ranks with Bogado.

Sen. Óscar González Daher was the first of "the 23" to experience being shunned when he was thrown out of a pizzeria after people began yelling, "Get out of here, thief!" The waiter who had refused to serve the legislator after hearing the first customers’ shouts, later told television reporters that he approached the senator "and I said those who voted to support Bogado are not welcome here."

The protests have brought a new word into the Paraguayan lexicon—escrachar. A verb that could be translated as "to scratch," which was popularized in recent years by militants of humanitarian movements in Argentina and Uruguay—in particular the relatives of victims of state terrorism during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s—has already been accepted by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española. The official authority on the Spanish language defines escrachar as "exposing a person to public derision because of his/her crime or behavior out of step with social norms."

The first week of January, two other senators were escrachados—one when he attended a funeral, the other when he was eating in a fancy restaurant in the mountains surrounding picturesque Lake Ypacaráí, 48 km north of Asunción.

That weekend, more than 100 nightclubs, theaters, movie houses, cafeterias, restaurants, gasoline stations, clothing stores, and even shopping centers posted signs on their doors prohibiting admission to the 23 senators. A model poster businesses use states: "This business reserves the right of admission to this location, and ‘the 23’ are not allowed."

Surprisingly, long-established businesses such as El Lido, a traditional restaurant a few meters from Congress, joined the anti-23 campaign. Founded in 1953, one year before the dictatorship of
Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) began, the Lido had flourished for the 35-years of the Partido Colorado-supported military government.

On Nov. 18, three major health providers with profitable—and, according to many analysts, suspicious—service-provider contracts with Congress joined the anti-23 campaign. That day, Asismed and the San Roque and La Costa clinics put eloquent signs on their reception counters that read: "Distinguished lawmakers, from this day on, we will serve you for purely humanitarian reasons and pursuant to the Hippocratic oath, but you infuriate us."

More than a month before Bogado’s immunity was stripped, corrupt lawmakers had begun to devise corporate forms of self-protection. On Oct. 8, Deputy Peter Milcíades Duré, suspected of fraudulently selling agrarian-reform lands, and Sen. Silvio Ovelar, filmed last April allegedly paying US$10 to voters who promised to vote for Cartes, asked their respective chambers to adopt resolutions to make it a crime for anyone to leak information on fees or salaries of legislative officials or to seek information that would violate the privacy of individuals.

Finally, on Nov. 28, the Senate reconsidered the motion to lift Bogado's immunity and, after violating the provision that no one can be tried twice for the same offense, expelled him from the Senate. That same day, in an attempt to improve his legal situation, Ovelar asked that his own immunity be lifted, and on Dec. 5, Duré was stripped of his immunity.

"Although they did it spontaneously, without any political organization, the Paraguayan people won the first battle, making a strong strike against influence peddling," Carlos Castillos, an analyst with the German news agency Deutsche Press-Agentur (DPA), wrote.

Academic Vicente Brunetti said, "For the first time, the citizens have acted on their indignation and won the fray. All we need now is for them to assume greater responsibility and commitment and give organic form to the power they demonstrated in those days."

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