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Government Downplays "Silver" Anniversary Of Dictator Alfredo Stroessner’s Departure

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Paraguay marked the 25th anniversary earlier this month of its return to democracy following three and one-half decades of bloody civic-military dictatorship under Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989). Stroessner’s was the longest-running single-leader dictatorship in Latin American history. The Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua lasted longer (43 years) but involved three different heads of state (a father and two sons) and was interrupted at various times.

And yet for all its significance, reactions to the anniversary, on Feb. 3, were markedly subdued, particularly by the government. There were a few academic events and a few television news items dedicated to the issue. Different groups made isolated demands. Also, the country’s six main labor unions took the opportunity to announce an upcoming general strike (set for late March) in opposition to a controversial privatization program being pushed through by President Horacio Cartes (NotiSur, Nov. 1, 2013). Paraguay’s main governmental bodies and political parties, however, were conspicuously quiet.

Many observers say the reason for the silence is that the people who now have positions of power in Paraguay tended, in large part, to benefit from the dictatorship. "There are sectors within the media, in politics, and in the business world that are interested in there not being any [historical] memory," Juan Rivarola, a legal advisor with Paraguay's Dirección General de Verdad, Justicia y Reparación (DGVJR), told the Spanish news agency EFE. "Keep in mind that many of country’s fortunes were made during the Stroessner era, thanks to political favoritism and illegal business dealings."

The resilient Partido Colorado

Stroessner was not overthrown by a popular or military movement but rather by a "palace coup" orchestrated by his Army chief, Gen. Andrés Rodríguez, with whom he was also related by marriage. Stroessner’s eldest son married Gen. Rodríguez’s daughter.

The Partido Colorado, the party that partnered with Stroessner throughout his 35-year regime, was neither investigated nor outlawed. Not only that, it retained control of the government—until 2008, when Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), a progressive, won the presidency (NotiSur, April 25, 2008). Denied its customary leadership role, the Partido Colorado continued, nevertheless, to exert a tremendous amount of political power. In 2013, after Lugo was ousted in a parliamentary coup (NotiSur, July 13, 2012), it once again took control of the government, this time under the leadership of President Cartes, a controversial businessman (NotiSur, Sept. 6, 2013).

Historians and analysts say the Partido Colorado’s continued relevance is neither coincidental nor anecdotal. A survey released Feb. 1 by the international polling firm Latinobarómetro found that 32% of Paraguayans still prefer an authoritarian government. The next day, the polling firm Estudios de Opinión released its own poll, according to which 47.5% consider Paraguay’s post-dictatorship governments to be "bad." More than 18% of respondents described the governments as "very bad."
Taken together, the two numbers suggest that 65.75%—approximately two-thirds of the population—disapprove of democracy.

"The data highlights the shortcomings of [Paraguay’s] low-quality democracy, which failed to meet the expectations of Paraguay’s nearly 7 million people and offer any social improvements," said Fernando Masi, director of the Centro de Análisis y Difusión de la Economía Paraguaya (CADEP).

**No amnesty, but no justice either**

By choosing to remain silent during the anniversary, the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, along with the political parties, missed an opportunity for a self-critical assessment of Paraguay’s quarter-century of democracy. Rights groups, in contrast, did seize the moment to speak out, recalling the Stroessner regime’s many human rights violations and demanding justice for its victims.

Unlike the other countries in the Southern Cone, which were also under dictatorial rule during the latter part of the 20th century, Paraguay never passed an amnesty law to protect perpetrators of crimes against humanity. Furthermore, ample evidence is available against the country’s human rights violators: more than 2,000 witness statements and thousands of pages of official documents pertaining to rights violations committed—in Paraguay and in neighboring countries—within the framework of Operación Cóndor, a program of coordinated repression carried out by the Southern Cone’s various dictatorships (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2009).

Nevertheless, all the judicial proceedings launched against the country’s human rights abusers have long been halted. Of the numerous people responsible for the dictatorship-era crimes, only a handful of low-ranking police officers were ever convicted. Frustrated by the lack of judicial progress in Paraguay, a group of 13 victims filed a case last year in Argentina, which has made major advances on the human rights front and where the "principle of universal justice" holds some sway.

**Appealing to the pope**

It was within this context that the well-known human rights activist and attorney Martín Almada, the person responsible in 1992 for uncovering the Archivos de Terror—documents detailing the repressive history of the Stroessner dictatorship and its involvement in Operación Cóndor (NotiSur, July 23, 2004), which Paraguay carried out in cooperation with Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Chile—recently returned his attention to a case originally presented in 1989 by the Fundación Celestina Pérez de Almada (FCPA). The foundation, which Almada directs, is named after his wife, another victim of the Stroessner dictatorship.

On Jan. 28, Almada visited the Holy See in the Vatican, where he delivered a letter addressed to Pope Francis, an Argentine. Doubtful that the Vatican would heed his request, Almada nevertheless asked the pope to unseal confidential church files dating back to the period of South America’s various dictatorships—"so that the truth be known and justice carried out," he wrote. "Those files contain communications that the various apostolic nuncios sent to Vatican authorities regarding the tragic human rights situation in our countries during those years of state terrorism. There is, in particular, information about the hundreds of Paraguayan citizens who were detained and disappeared in Argentina."

Three days later, on Feb. 1, the FCPA delivered a message to the leaders of the Partido Colorado, asking them to make a public apology for the party’s dictatorial past. To the surprise of many,
the foundation also demanded that they stop referring to Stroessner as the "honorary president of the Partido Colorado." The FCPA made a similar request regarding the party’s "honorary vice president," Sabino Augusto Montanaro, who served as interior minister—and thus chief of the country's organs of repression—during the final 23 years of the dictatorship.

Stroessner died on Aug. 16, 2006, in his mansion in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, where he lived in exile after fleeing Paraguay. Montanaro, who among other things is known for hiding a clandestine grave (containing the remains of some 20 people) under his ministry offices, died five years later in his house in Asunción. He was never put on trial for his crimes.

In another letter, this one addressed to President Cartes, the FCPA wrote: "If they really want to turn over a new leaf, as they promised during the last presidential campaign, the Partido Colorado and the president must apologize to the Paraguayan people for the dictatorship's crimes." Neither the Partido Colorado nor Cartes responded to the FCPA’s demands.

"Someone stole it"
Interestingly, some of Paraguay’s former Operación Cóndor partners have made a point recently of delving into the misdeeds of their former dictatorships. In late January, Brazilian Foreign Minister Luiz Alberto Figueiredo signed an agreement with his counterparts from Argentina (Héctor Timerman) and Uruguay (Luis Almagro) to share human rights-related information in their respective Operación Cóndor-era files. Paraguay’s absence in the joint initiative is notable.

Victims of the dictatorship received even more bad news on Jan. 30, when Rogelio Goiburú, the head of the DGVJR, revealed that money set aside for identifying the remains of people killed and disappeared during the Stroessner regime had gone missing. "Someone stole it," said Goiburú in reference to US$150,000 in funds that his team of researchers had finally, just last December, secured for their humanitarian work.

The government’s apparent indifference to the human rights issue does not, however, mean that the many atrocities committed during Stroessner’s long hold on power have been forgotten. In 2008, Paraguay’s Comisión de Verdad y Justicia (the predecessor to the DGVJR) confirmed that at least 425 people were executed or disappeared during the dictatorship. In addition, nearly 20,000 people were detained and more than a 1 million forced into exile.

"It’s believed that 10,000 of those political prisoners passed through a regular-looking house, in downtown Asunción, in which the Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Técnicos operated," EFE correspondent Muñoz Acebes explained in an article published Jan. 28. Directly dependent on interior minister Montanaro, the Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Técnicos, better known as "La Técnica," was a secret prison and torture center. "Today it is a quiet place called the Museo de la Memoria," Acebes wrote. "There, on display, is a cattle prod that was used to torture people with electric shocks, rods used to beat them, and a ball with spikes used to rip open heir backs. When the guards turned the music up to drown out the other sounds, the detainees knew they were going to be tortured."

La Técnica wasn’t the only place political detainees were subjected to such treatment. "The whole country was a prison," the EFE article concluded. "People weren’t just tortured in hidden places, by secret police, but in normal police stations, by regular officers."