7-3-2015

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Drug Lords Plague Paraguayan Politics
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Category/Department: Paraguay
Published: 2015-07-03

Although Paraguay doesn’t figure prominently on the world drug-trafficking map either as a producer or distribution point, drug mafias are increasingly present, taking an active role in the battle for political power in several arenas of that South American country.

Everything—from the assassination of campesino leaders and journalists to the adoption of a law or the election of political-party leaders—is riddled with the actions of illegal groups. In recent weeks, Magdaleno Silva, an ex-deputy from the Asociación Nacional Republicana/Partido Colorado (ANR-PC) was assassinated; a PC senator (Carlos Sánchez) was detained; and another PC senator (Mario Abdo Benítez) headed up a group of legislators who distanced themselves from the administration and proposed revising some of the laws that President Horacio Cartes, also from the PC, had defined as "top priority to keep the government going." The mafia, either directly or indirectly, can be seen in each and every one of these events.

Mafia-type hit
As a legislator, Magdaleno Silva did not leave a legacy. In his five years in office, he never presented a bill or participated in legislative debates. He was assassinated along with one of his sons in broad daylight on May 5 when a group of hooded assailants pelleted the door of his Yby Yaú, Concepción, home with gunshots. Yby Yaú, some 350 km north of Paraguay’s capital Asunción, is in an area near the Brazilian border that has been identified as drug-trafficker territory.

Minutes after his death, the daily Última Hora launched what would become the first critical view of the politician. The newspaper said that Silva "handled the political life of Concepción as if he were a feudal lord," and it reproduced a journalistic report from 2007, when Silva was still in office, quoting people in the department saying he was "an unscrupulous political boss" and "a man who acted as though his wishes were the only law."

Testimonials that carried institutional weight followed. Bishop Emeritus Zacarías Ortiz of Concepción said, "Ex-deputy Silva was a man who acted as if he were above the law, appearing like the typical mafia padrino."

Lilián Samaniego, PC national president, asked that the episode not be politicized but made a statement connecting the assassination with the drug mafia. "Our party," she said, "regrets that organized crime is settling in in the country." The PC leader then made a surprising revelation when she said she had met with Interior Minister Francisco De Vargas and that he had said that "a good number of party members are involved in illegal business" and that he "has a lot of information about people in the party or party sympathizers who have links to drug trafficking."

Later, De Vargas addressed the press and said, "Everything points to the Silva crime being a mafia matter with characteristics of a contract murder."
Drug dealer implicates De Vargas from prison

A Brazilian drug dealer imprisoned in Paraguay said, however, that he had bribed De Vargas so he could act freely and added, "Although he was never investigated, Silva has a long history of links to narcos."

Step by step, the party leadership admitted that, just as in Colombia, the narcopolítica phenomenon has emerged in Paraguay.

On June 11, a month after the Silva assassination, Pablo Servín, the Associated Press (AP) correspondent in Asunción, released information about a recording two senators made when they visited the Brazilian drug trafficker, Ezequiel de Souza, in jail. De Souza, jailed since 2012 after he was arrested for transporting a shipment of 1,758 kg of cocaine, gave details about the "payment of bribes to Partido Colorado leaders and to a journalist." He said that he paid "some US$160,000 per month to government officials so he would be allowed to move freely in the country and avoid police and fiscal controls."

The revelations of the Brazilian drug dealer sparked a national scandal because of the involvement of government officials and other individuals. Although he did not provide many names in his testimony, he specifically cited Minister De Vargas. "On one occasion I gave De Vargas' assistant US $60,000 when the assistant was a judicial prosecutor, but I have no documents to prove this because everything was done without signing any papers," De Souza said. The "assistant" the drug dealer referred to is Javier Ibarra, the vice minister of internal security.

In jail, De Souza spoke with Sens. Arnaldo Giuzzio of the Partido Democrático Progresista (PDP) and Arnoldo Wiens of the PC, who were accompanied on the visit by Luis Rojas, head of the Secretaría Nacional Antidrogas (SENAD). The drug dealer affirmed that he spoke so that they would provide him protection because "I am a veritable walking archive. I know many compromising things about many people, and here, in the jail, they’ve threatened me with death. I want to at least get protection for my daughters."

Before ending his monologue, the trafficker said that "everyone charged and I paid them all—police, prosecutors, judges, politicians, military officials. … I don’t recall any prosecutor or any political leader in Concepción whom I haven’t paid."

One of the few people he specifically mentioned by name was PC Deputy Cristina Villalba, a leader of President Cartes’ inner circle. The legislator was the "protector" of Neneco Acosta, the mayor of Canindeyú (another Concepción town), jailed for having ordered the Oct. 16, 2014, murder of two journalists. Pablo Medina and Antonia Almada were correspondents of the newspaper ABC Color, Paraguay’s daily with the largest circulation, and at the time they were killed they were investigating ramifications of drug trafficking in Paraguay’s departments in the north and east along the Brazilian border (NotiSur, Nov. 21, 2014).

In the recording with the senators, De Souza claimed that he had become a US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) informant, a fact neither confirmed nor denied by the agency or the US Embassy in Asunción.

Magdaleno Silva was a confidant of Sen. Mario Abdo Benítez in the department of Concepción as well as the candidate for the mayor of Yby Yaú representing the senator’s political sector. Beyond
the question of who might have ordered the assassination, connections between the death and the
drug world were difficult to ignore. In 2011, Brazilian drug dealer Ximenes Pavão was arrested.
He was in hiding, with De Silva’s protection, in a countryside establishment that belonged to then
deputy Benítez. Benítez also was the political mentor of Deputy Carlos Rubén Sánchez, detained
May 22 when he left the presidential house where he had met with Cartes.

Sánchez is accused of ties to drug-trafficking gangs. This did not affect, however, Benítez’s political
weight in both the Partido Colorado and in the Senate. Thus, on June 5, he headed a movement
that ended up dividing the Colorado bloc in the Senate during which 15 members broke away.
Cartes lost his majority in the upper house. These events, including Sánchez’s arrest, are linked to
upcoming PC primary elections set for July 26. Benítez hopes to be elected party president in those
elections, replacing Lilián Samaniego, a loyal Cartes follower.

**Party infighting harms president**

Since Benítez’s falling out with Cartes that provoked the division in the Colorado bloc in the Senate,
the president has suffered three difficult setbacks.

First, on June 4, the Senate revised the Asociación Público Privada (APP) law and nullified a
key article (Article 52), by which when the law was passed in 2013 the Senate had delegated the
president powers that constitutionally belong to the Senate (NotiSur, May 15, 2015). Thus, Cartes
was authorized to transfer or privatize nearly all state goods and services, including roads and
airports, schools, hospitals, and prisons. On June 16, the Chamber of Deputies rejected the Senate’s
decision, initiating a tug of war that no one knows how or when will end.

Second, also on June 4, the Senate dropped a bill that would require Internet service providers to
retain traffic data for 12 months. The goal was to keep data available for the judiciary should it be
needed at some time to try an accused person for crimes of pedophilia, terrorism, or drug trafficking.
The Senate had passed the bill, but the deputies rejected it. Once it returned to the originating
chamber, it was archived despite a special presidential request it be voted on.

Third, and finally, on June 16, the president suffered his worst setback. The Senate fired its
president, Blas Llano of the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), a Cartes’ ally, and elected

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