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Governing Party Loses Ground (and Asunción) in Paraguayan Municipal Elections

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Routine local elections held in Paraguay last month resulted in something of a national plebiscite that could help redraw the country’s political map. Analysts and political scientists agree that the results were first and foremost a defeat for President Haracio Cartes, whose Partido Colorado (PC), also known as the Asociación Nacional Republicana (ANR), lost 108 of the 250 municipal districts in play. But they also see the elections as damaging to ex-President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), who was ousted in a palace coup in June 2012, and to journalist Mario Ferreiro, winner of the mayoral contest in Asunción, Paraguay’s capital city and largest electoral district.

For Cartes, the setback was a particularly heavy blow given the role he unnecessarily assigned himself as the PC’s national campaign chief. Once again, the conservative leader demonstrated his shortcomings as a statesman. Lugo, for his part, erred by deciding, for selfish reasons, not to support Ferreiro. He was the only opposition figure to do so. And Ferreiro failed by limiting his scope to local issues, focusing only on Asunción and remaining skeptical about the left’s chances of recovering the national leadership role it lost in 2012 (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

The Nov. 15 elections attracted only about 40% of eligible voters, a record low in the short democratic history of the country, which was controlled between 1954 and 1989 by the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner.

The biggest prize, the mayorship of Asunción, went to Ferreiro, who won 51% of the votes compared to 41% for the governing party candidate Arnaldo Samaniego, a close ally of Cartes and the brother of Lilián Samaniego, the PC’s immovable party president. The contest cost Cartes both figuratively and literally – he personally funded Samaniego’s campaign. Lugo, by choosing not to support the winner, also paid dearly. In Asunción, the left wing Frente Guasú coalition – from which he stepped down as president three days after the election – took just 4.5% of the vote.

The PC also struggled in the rest of the Central department, where the capital is located, losing 13 of the area’s 19 municipalities, which together represent about a quarter of Paraguay’s approximately 4 million eligible voters. The leaders of the opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), who facilitated Ferreiro’s candidacy by “loaning” him their party structure, are now beginning to wonder if they can forge a similar alliance for the 2018 national elections and thus repeat the winning formula.

“The PC’s defeat in the municipal elections could reshape the political framework and bury Cartes’ hopes for reelection, because it was the president who lost the most,” wrote Carlos Castillos in a Nov. 16 dispatch for the German news agency DPA. In order to run again, Cartes would have to reform the Constitution, which dates back to 1992 and bars presidents from running for reelection.

Castillos consulted two independent political scientists, Gustavo Becker and Alfredo Boccia, who agreed that Cartes neither needed to nor was asked to take a leading role in the campaign. “He
became a kind of barrabrava (rabid soccer fan) for some of the candidates, making very strong statements that reflect his authoritarian streak, like on Nov. 3, when he vindicated Stroessner and said, ‘Like it not, and regardless of who might be offended, I want to dye the Republic red,’” Boccia told Castillos.

More than a few observers remarked on Cartes’ use of the word “rojo” rather than “colorado.” Both words mean “red” but have very different connotations. The latter would have been a reference to his political party, while the former conjures up images of blood, violence and death.

**Will he or won’t he**

Since April, Cartes has been using some of his massive fortune, perhaps just a small part, to buy up media outlets and form what is already the sector’s leading holding company. He took things further still in September, when his sister Sarah, the media conglomerate’s top executive, confirmed that in addition to Grupo Nación (the dailies Crónica and La Nación, and radio stations 970AM and Montecarlo) the company has also taken control of the dailies Popular and Hoy.com, the digital radio station Laser Stream and the HEi Social Music Network, a cable television broadcaster.

The Cartes family has also acquired various community radio stations in the departments of Concepción, San Pedro and Canindeyú that were previously owned by campesino organizations. Efforts to secure yet another station, AM Cardinal, which has one of the country’s largest audience bases, are still underway.

The general opinion in the media world is that the buying spree is part of the president’s reelection strategy, something he dismissed in July – when asked to clarify his political plans – as “inventions by the opposition and the press.” He later made several statements suggesting he is interested in running again in 2018. But on Nov. 19, four days after the municipal elections, Cartes insisted publicly that he would not “fight for another term.” The statement also followed the release of a poll conducted for the daily Última Hora suggesting that 73% of Paraguayans think “no one believes Cartes because he hasn’t followed through on any of his promises.”

Beyond the issue of whether Cartes will stick to his word regarding another run for office, the recent balloting clearly taught him a lesson. He isn’t likely to forget the huge mistake he made by unnecessarily turning what should have been simple municipal elections into a plebiscite that ended up hurting his reelection chances.

Analyst Paulo López noted that in the majority of the country’s 250 cities, voters went against the incumbent party, a trend that also resulted in losses for the PLRA. But he also said, “Dispersion among progressive forces meant once again that dissatisfied voters and protest votes were divided among the conservative parties”—the PC and PLRA.

**From statesman to caudillo**

López made a stark observation, furthermore, about the 60% abstention rate. “That was the big news of the day at a time when the parties only represent personal ambitions and the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (Paraguay’s top electoral authority) offers no guarantee of transparency,” he wrote in an article for the news site E’a.

“All twenty-six years after the start of the ‘democratic transition,’ the vote is no longer seen as a genuine tool of participation,” he added. “Elections seem like a contest in which the key players are
money and tricks. Indeed, the buying of votes and voter cards and speculation by the large media outlets with regards to exit polls turned out to be the order of the day, manipulating the results.”

The other fundamental element at play in the Nov. 15 elections was a rejection, on the national level, of the reelection project. Cartes assumed office in August 2013 promising to modernize the country and do away with the system of perks that had sustained the hegemony of the PC since the early years of the Stroessner dictatorship (NotiSur, Sept. 6, 2013). But according to López, an internal rebellion within the party, led by Sen. Mario Abdo Benítez, who hails from one of the most important Colorado families, forced the president to shed the role of statesman and instead become just another caudillo, one who insists the health of the country depends on the health of the PC and even made the mistake of inviting Paraguayan citizens to “dye the country red.”

On the policy front, the president’s actions have been limited to orthodox neoliberal economic measures such as austerity cuts to the healthcare and education budget, but with an increase in military spending. And despite doubling the country’s foreign debt, which now exceeds US$6 billion—and paying interest on idle funds that have yet to be put to use—the large and vital infrastructure projects he promised aren’t even in the blueprint stage.

From a political standpoint, all indicators suggest Cartes should give up the idea of running again. Nevertheless, many of his ministers continue to talk as if reelection were a real possibility, and plans to change the Constitution may still be high up on the administration’s agenda.

More than a few people, now that the sting of the election defeat has begun to subside, have already gone back to talking about how the democracy is mature enough to allow for reelection. One of those voices is Defense Minister Diógenes Martínez, who is pushing for a reform that would also expand the power of the Armed Forces. He suggests lifting a ban that prevents the military from intervening in domestic security situations, something it is already doing, incidentally, in the north of the country, where it is engaged against what most Paraguayans see as an imaginary guerrilla force that only seems to appear when the Colorados need to crack down on the campesino movement.

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