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Paraguay Protests Highlight Small Farmers' Concerns

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Campesinos (agrarian workers), indigenous groups, small-scale rural producers, students, teachers, doctors, and stakeholders in cooperative-owned businesses—each sector with its own demands, and without any unifying leadership—managed, nevertheless, to form an unprecedented alliance in Paraguay, occupying the streets of Asunción, the capital, and forcing President Horacio Cartes to the negotiating table.

For five weeks starting in March, the city was immersed from dawn to dusk in a mounting wave of anti-government outrage that President Cartes initially treated with indifference but was ultimately forced to address. “Cartes thought he could just wait it out, that the protestors, given what a disparate group they are, would run out of steam. But when he saw that the situation risked unfolding into a general strike, he had to acknowledge the power that this movement—unlike anything Paraguay has seen in the past 15 years—has acquired,” an analyst for the German news agency DPA explained in an April 13 article.

The first to make their presence felt were rural workers organized by the Federación Nacional Campesina (FNC). Bearing flags and traditional “foisas” (the Guaraní name for the machetes used by farm laborers), they descended on Asunción from across the country and explained to the city’s initially dismissive and unreceptive public their four basic reasons for protesting: to denounce the repression they constantly suffer at the hands of state police and private security forces employed by landowners, to reject the overuse by large-scale soy planters of toxic agrochemicals, to protest rampant public-sector corruption, and to reclaim farmland so as to avoid the exodus of 300,000 small-scale producers to urban areas.

Two more organizations—the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Trabajadoras Rurales e Indígenas (CONAMURI), an indigenous and rural women’s group, and the Organización de Lucha por la Tierra (OLT), a land rights group—joined the protests soon after.

Rural repression and roundup

Updated figures released late last year by the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CONADEH), a civil society organization, suggest that between 1989—when the Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) finally ended — and 2015, at least 157 campesino leaders were killed in Paraguay (NotiSur, May 20, 2016). Many people suspect the number of violent deaths is far higher given that hardly a week goes by without stories surfacing about another worker being killed “in the areas razed by deforestation and soy plantations,” CONADEH reported.

On April 13, the Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya, the country’s conference of Catholic bishops, addressed the issue for the first time in years. In a press release, the bishops blamed the violence on “the joint Army-police task forces that repress the poorest campesino families” and said the protests in Asunción speak to “the failure, by current authorities and their predecessors, to solve a longstanding problem.” The bishops also expressed concern that “the complaints aren’t being answered with solutions and institutional reforms favoring development and the permanence [in rural areas] of our people.”
Campesinos like Teodolinda Villalba, one of the FNC leaders, claim that the agrochemicals used in soy farming “are as deadly as the landowners’ police.” The FNC points to medical attestations to suggest that glyphosate, an herbicide produced by Monsanto and marketed under the name “Roundup,” causes different kinds of cancer, affects the normal development of fetuses, and pollutes both the land and the water. Agrochemical use is increasing, furthermore, at an exponential rate, according to the non-governmental organization Base Investigaciones Sociales (Base-IS). In 2009, Paraguay imported 8.8 million liters of the chemicals. By 2013, the number jumped to 44 million liters (NotiSur, March 20, 2015). The FNC suspects that planters now use some 60 million liters per year.

The numbers were submitted to the UN’s Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights along with a note highlighting “the need to implement protocols and policies to handle and prevent poisonings in the communities, and to set up a team to investigate the effects agrochemicals have on human health, the environment, and water sources.”

Corruption and ill-gotten lands

The third item in the FNC’s platform, public sector corruption, is an endemic problem that has recently cost deputies, senators, judges and even members of Paraguay’s Supreme Court their jobs (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015, and July 3, 2015). Corruption allegations have even been leveled at President Cartes, who is accused of laundering drug money through his Banco Amambay and of leading an international trafficking operation involving contraband cigarettes produced by Tabacalera del Este, a tobacco manufacturer he owns (NotiSur, Sept. 11, 2015).

The US government has concerns as well. On March 18, Albert Kraaimoore, the political and economic section chief at the US Embassy in Asunción, held a meeting in his office with the presidents of two key judicial bodies, the Consejo de la Magistratura and the Jurado de Enjuiciamiento de Magistrados. The diplomat told his guests that the US government is uncomfortable with how Paraguayan judges often let people being investigated for drug trafficking, organized crime, or other transnational crimes walk free.

The final area of focus for the campesino groups, land tenancy, is a historical and deeply important issue that involves a number of specific demands. One is that small plots of land be distributed among the rural poor as a way to keep them from migrating to cities, a displacement that is not only creating problems in overcrowded urban areas, but is also affecting Paraguay’s food sovereignty. Another demand is that the state forgive an estimated US$120 million in debts accrued by approximately 100,000 small-scale farmers who tend plots of land no larger than 15 hectares and have suffered from damaging weather events.

In addition, the FNC and its allies are lobbying the state for help in recovering what are known as “ill-gotten lands”—land that was appropriated starting in the middle of the 20th century by military people, civilians with close ties to the Stroessner dictatorship, and entities exempt from the agrarian reform. The campesino groups recently launched a signature drive to demand direct intervention by the state. Their efforts are being supported of Oxfam and other international organizations.

The land in question is owned by approximately 3,300 people or legal entities, many of them linked to the governing Partido Colorado, which supported the Stroessner dictatorship and continues to exert power through President Cartes. A report released in 2008 by the Comisión de Verdad
y Justicia, a government-level investigative committee, found that the ill-gotten lands amount to nearly 8 million hectares and that land appropriations continued until as recently as 2003.

The issue of land ownership is of particular importance given Paraguay’s current failure to produce enough food to meet domestic demand. As a result, the country has to import products it should otherwise be able to grow. The problem, say organizations like Oxfam and Base-IS, is that only 8% of farmland is used to grow food for internal consumption. The other 92% is used to grow export crops, mostly soy. Paraguay is the world’s fourth leading producer of the valuable oilseed.

“The recovery of the ill-gotten lands will guarantee food sovereignty, end the need to import [food] and allow for the availability of cheaper, more varied and better quality products,” the FNC, CONAMURI and OLT explained in a joint press release. “The recovery of lands will also reduce the number of campesino families forced to migrate.” Base-IS estimates that some 1 million rural Paraguayans have been pushed out of the countryside.

Earning a seat at the table

On April 19, the Día del Aborigen Americano (Day of the Indigenous People of America), organizations representing Paraguay’s estimated 116,000 indigenous people (from 19 tribes) joined the protests in Asunción. Indigenous people account for approximately 1.7% of the population. More than three quarters of them (76%) are in a situation of extreme poverty, according to the Instituto Paraguayo del Indígena (INDI).

During a government-organized event in Asunción, Margarita Mbywangi, a leader of the Aché tribe, spoke with the EFE news agency about the four focal points of the campesino campaign. She said that just two days earlier, “a group of toughs employed by the Brazilians (in reference to the soy planters) attacked [an indigenous] community, leaving six of our brothers with bullet wounds, but in the government, no one has said anything.”

Mbywangi also took issue with government claims that it is helping ensure food security. “That’s not true. Food security isn’t about distributing packets of food. It’s about guaranteeing us the land, providing us with seeds and tools, and assuring us that our products will sell,” she said. The Aché leader touched on the issue of soy production as well, saying that “the advance of deforestation to plant more soy, which brings with it the use of more agrochemicals” represents a real threat.

The Cartes administration treated the demonstrations with indifference until May 6, when—having realized the fallacy of its “wait-it-out” strategy—it agreed to hold talks with the parties involved. For the campesino groups, the government promised to send Congress a bill to restructure the debts of small-scale farmers and provide a subsidy of US$1.8 million. It promised the indigenous groups that it would investigate the daily reports of violence along the border with Brazil. For cooperatives, it backtracked on a controversial plan that would have required them to pay a value-added tax on their earnings. And for doctors and students, the administration promised funding for new or upgraded facilities and more supplies.

Assuming he can follow through on all these promises, Cartes will have lifted a huge weight off his shoulders, freeing himself up to seek support for his plan to reform the Constitution and thus seek reelection (Notisur, Dec. 11, 2015).