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Opinion polls about the public image of Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes taken at the end of his first three years in office confirmed what had long been suspected: On average, three out of every four Paraguayans have a poor, or very poor, opinion of the president’s performance (NotiSur, May 10, 2013, and May 15, 2015).

Paraguay is perhaps the only country in the region in which opinion polls tend to reflect reality, and in this case the polls showed that all social sectors are highly critical of Cartes. About 67% of the upper class holds the president in low esteem; the proportion of middle class people with a low opinion of the president climbs to 76%; among the lower class, it topped 80%.

After the polls were released, the government attempted to restore Cartes’ political image with an offensive that ultimately backfired, leaving the president, his ministers, his closest officials, and his Colorado Party in a harsh spotlight.

A plot to kill the president?

The poll results came out on Aug. 13, Cartes’ third anniversary in office, and almost immediately—and remarkably—the government revealed that it had uncovered a plan to assassinate the president. On Sept. 2, a day after a meeting between the president and his top advisers, Paraguayans were surprised by a report of the alleged assassination plan. The plot “led us to take top security measures to protect the president, his family, and all of us that are at this dance,” Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas told local journalists and foreign correspondents. After providing an explanation full of contradictions, he said that the government couldn’t give details but added that it had credible information provided by a police informant.

Later it was revealed that intelligence services were investigating the alleged payment of US$5 million to a group of Brazilian hit men “hired by drug dealer Jarvis Chimenes Pavão——who has been in a Paraguayan prison since 2009—to destabilize the government and kill the president.”

Over the following days, and almost as an homage to the president, the Colorado Party announced that it would push for a constitutional amendment to permit presidential reelection.

The opposition, which at no time accepted the official reports on the plot, responded by calling for the impeachment of Interior Minister de Vargas, and filed legal complaints against Javier Díaz Verón, the current attorney general, and Hugo Vera, the national anti-drug secretary, “for their attitudes of submitting to the political power and its connection to drug trafficking” (NotiSur, Sept. 23, 2016).

On Oct. 20, Olga Ferreira, an independent member of Paraguay’s Congress, noted that 48 days had gone by and no attempt against the country’s institutions had occurred. “It shows that Minister De Vargas considers us as a bunch of idiots whom he can fool with any stupid story,” she said.

After De Vargas’ announcement, Vera said that “in light of the seriousness of the information received, it was decided to activate a red alert for the whole country,” meaning to build up border
security to prevent the entry of the alleged Brazilian hit men. Over the next few days, the Attorney General’s Office began to take testimony from government officials who, in one way or another, had participated in the debate about the assassination plot.

The scant information offered, as well as the contradictory elements with which the government tried to sustain the attempted assassination charges, led the opposition to accuse De Vargas of “inventing a presidential assassination to justify errors that he has committed in his job of keeping society safe.” The statement was made in a letter in which lawmakers called for De Vargas’ impeachment. “The issue is perceived with fear on the part of the population because of a government policy that tends to favor private security agencies, leaving whole areas of the country to their fate,” the letter said, specifically mentioning the departments of San Pedro, Concepción, and Amambay, where it is thought the two largest Brazilian drug cartels operate.

The German news agency DPA on Sept. 6 quoted legislators from different sectors including Roberto Acevedo, president of the Congress, who said that De Vargas was privatizing public security, “turning it into a business for his friends.” Acevedo accused the Attorney General’s Office of being at the service of political power and drug mafias.

During the early stages of the debate on an issue that could seriously compromise the government, and after a private security guard was shot to death during a robbery at a supermarket in the capital city of Asunción, the daily La Nación published an investigation on how private security guards are treated by their employers. On Aug. 29, La Nación—one of the four dailies purchased by the Cartes family between April and August of last year—reported that private security workers receive a weekly salary equivalent to just $US501 for a six-day work week of 12-hour days, and noted, “Offering security services has become a major industry that generates millionaire contracts.” What the pro-government publication did not say was that a major client of these private security agencies is the government itself, including all the ministries, public banks, universities, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the presidency.

**Government contracts private security**

It was the newspaper 5 Días that provided financial data about the security business and named the government as the major client. Backed with a report from the Dirección Nacional de Contrataciones Públicas (DNCP), it said that last year—the most recent completed statistics—state agencies contracted security services for more than US$12.8 billion. That amount, the paper said, “acquires real magnitude when it is compared to the total budget of the Interior Ministry, which is charged with national security: barely US$530 million.” 5 Días gave a list of the 17 companies that benefitted most from state contracts—one alone accounted for 61% of the total disbursements—and concluded: “To provide security services to public institutions is another one of the surefire businesses for those who are friends with the powerful, a business that moves astronomical sums of money and involves people who have been part of the state apparatus, specifically the national police, the judiciary, and Congress.

Ignoring the official statements about the alleged plan to assassinate the president (which had been largely discredited on the street), ABC Color, a right-leaning daily that is nevertheless at odds with Cartes, joined the campaign of government critics and affirmed, “The insecurity and low number of police assigned to protect the citizenry has turned private security companies into a wonderful business.” It noted that in 2012, before the legislative coup that ended the democratic government of Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), a former Catholic bishop, 229 security companies were registered.
with the government and 63 others were in the process of registering. By 2013, the number had risen to 252, with 63 unauthorized agencies. Now, it’s 270, according to the Labor Ministry, or 278, according to the National Police, employing between 7,000 and 10,000 agents authorized to carry arms. The number of companies seeking authorization to operate is placed between 50 and 60, and the number 63 continues to appear, but this time as the number of agencies that have regularly enrolled personnel.

On Sept. 14, Telefuturo—a Paraguayan-licensed television chain affiliated with Mexico’s Televisa—cited unidentified official sources saying the state had contracted private security services for a total of US$125 million between 2010 and the end of 2015, and that Security Service Technology (SST) took nearly half of that total. The figure becomes more significant because the owner of SST is José Chamorro, a former deputy and an influential member of the Colorado Party. ABC Color concurred with Telefuturo’s criticism of the government, saying, “It doesn’t make sense that an army of armed civilians paid by the state—numbering between 7,000 and 10,000 private agents—grows while the police uses 62% of its men for administrative tasks, protection of Colorado Party leaders, or low-cost bodyguards for businessmen.”

According to statistics cited by the paper, only 38% of the National Police—8,050 persons out of a total 21,187 employed—is directly tasked with security activity. It concludes, “As the number is divided in two shifts of 12 hours each, it means that in reality there are little more than 4,000 agents responsible for protecting 7 million Paraguayans.”

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