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Andrés Gaudín

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Current and Former Presidents Seek New Terms in Paraguay

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Paraguay's last two constitutional presidents—Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) and Fernando Lugo (2008-2012)—and the current head of state, Horacio Cartes, are pushing the country's institutional structure to a dangerous limit: Without any agreement from political structures or the judicial branch, the elections set for April 22, 2018, paradoxically could constitute a new assault on democracy. This fear has been expressed by political analysts from all Paraguayan media outlets except those that belong to Grupo Cartes ([NotiSur, Dec. 11, 2015](#), and [March 3, 2017](#)).

Article 229 of the Paraguayan Constitution is vague regarding the reelection of a president, and its language can be interpreted in different ways, depending on one's interests.

Would-be candidates are campaigning while analysts debate whether the issue of presidential re-election should be addressed with a constitutional amendment, by calling for a constitutional assembly to reform Article 229, or by allowing the Supreme Court to have the final word on what the wording of the article actually means. The elections for president and vice president, 45 senators, 80 congressmen, and 17 department governors—during which the country's citizens and for the second time, more than 700,000 Paraguayans living abroad will vote—are not scheduled for another 13 months. But among imprecise and hardly credible rumors of a coup d'état, everyone is acting as if re-election were constitutionally allowed.

The controversial Article 229 specifically states, "beginning the 15th of August following elections, the president and the vice president of the republic will remain in office for a five-year period that is not to be extended, and they will not be able to be reelected in any case..." The wording of the article is open to interpretation. Lugo, for example, says that having been overthrown by a coup 14 months before the end of his official term, he can run again ([NotiSur, Nov. 9, 2012](#), and [Jan. 18, 2013](#)). Based on the opinion of the country's top constitutional analysts, Marcos Fariña, Lugo's attorney, said, "The former president is eligible because the Constitution says 'the president can't be reelected' without clarifying the situation of the former presidents. Thus, Cartes is the only one who can't run again now."

Alleged assassination plot

The climate is not ideal for a campaign for a position as important as that of president of the republic. Nor is it good for the country to immerse itself in an electoral debate for so many months. Potential candidates began to express their plans last October, after Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas surprised everyone by announcing that the government had "well founded reports" of the existence of a plot to assassinate Cartes, planned in a prison where a Brazilian drug dealer has been held since 2009.

According to the minister, everyone in the government had become potential assassination targets under a plot hatched by Comando Vermelho and Primer Comando Capital (Red Command and First Capital Command), Brazil's two largest drug trafficking organizations. The organizations,

he said, “had earmarked US\$5 million for hiring a group of hit men.” De Vargas did not take into account the fact that the two groups are mortal enemies, so it would be unlikely for them to join forces outside Brazil for such a plan ([NotiSur, July 3, 2015](#)).

At the time, the government announced the opening of a judicial investigation and said the state security force had been put on “red alert.” Congressman Ariel Oviedo, member of a dissident wing of the ruling Colorado Party said, “This is a situation that makes the country look ridiculous.” The alleged, dreadful plan was not spoken of again.

Since 2015, when Grupo Cartes began acquiring media properties, including daily papers and radio and TV channels, there has been talk of the president’s plan to run for re-election ([NotiSur, May 15, 2015](#)). Cartes denied this until the end of last year, when he acknowledged his intentions. In August 2016, legislators associated with the Colorado Party had proposed an amendment that would specifically eliminate the Article 229 re-election clause that has plunged politicians and constitutionalists into a debate. The proposal was rejected by a majority of legislators, and thus cannot be debated again for a full year, which means Congress cannot deal with it until August 2017. Regardless, and although it knows it’s a vote short for approval, the Colorado Party majority insists on dealing with it now.

Fraud mars referendum proposal

Honor Colorado, the Colorado Party’s dominant wing, launched a campaign to collect signatures for a referendum on the amendment with the motto, “Let the people decide.” They needed 30,000 signatures, but as a sign of the “overwhelming popular will that calls for the continuity of our President Cartes,” Honor Colorado went to the Superior Court of Electoral Justice (Tribunal Superior de la Justicia Electoral, TSJE) with several trucks carrying hundreds of notebooks with, supposedly, the signatures of 360,000 citizens. After a preliminary review, the TSJE, which is made up of a majority of Cartes supporters, established that about 75,000 signatures (more than 20% of those turned in by Honor Colorado) were false, belonged to dead people, or were not on the voter registration list.

After the opposition used adjectives such as embarrassing, pathetic, dirty, and grotesque to describe the failed maneuver by the president’s followers, dissident leaders in Congress and the leaders of the Authentic Liberal Revolutionary Party (Partido Liberal Revolucionario Auténtico, PLRA) went to court to accuse Pedro Alliana, the Colorado Party president, and Senators Lilián Samaniego and Juan Darío Monges of criminally “carrying out punishable acts [by] producing false documents.” Samaniego, Cartes’ executive assistant and the presidential spokeswoman in Congress, acknowledged that “there were excesses in gathering signatures.” However, she added, “This is not our responsibility, because party structures were infiltrated by real political delinquents to cause us this damage.”

The opposition called the fraudulent signatures “a harbinger of the deceit that the Colorado Party is preparing for election day.” The maneuver, they added, turned into a boomerang.

Meanwhile, Lugo’s followers celebrated each time a new opinion poll was released that continued to show the former president as the preferred candidate with a comfortable percentage of voters. The last poll, taken March 1, indicated 52.6% of the voters intended to vote for Lugo, while neither Cartes nor any of the other candidates reached 12% support. According to a poll from the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Socioeconómicos (CIES), a market analysis company associated with

the international consulting firm IBOPE (Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística), the Colorado Party faces another problem. If the Constitution cannot be interpreted to allow the candidacy of any of the three presidential candidates in play, it must find another candidate. Whoever the ruling party chooses, it would lose by a wide margin to the progressive mayor of Asunción, Mario Ferreiro, a former Lugo ally who split from the former president's Frente Guasú. The difference is 47.3% against a mere 17.4% for Senator Mario Abdo Benítez, a Colorado member who has strongly challenged Cartes. Efraín Alegre, from the opposition PLRA ([NotiSur, Dec. 9, 2016](#)), is in third place.

Whether Cartes' original plan was to become president for a second term, or to be the only leader in the Colorado Party able to choose the official candidate—a loser judging by the CIES poll—his project has failed. Fernando Martínez Escobar, a researcher at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) in Argentina, said the signature collection in which Cartes' followers engaged "could well have been a smoke screen" to guarantee the president wouldn't lose power during his last 17 months in office. If this is the case, Martínez wrote in *Cuadernos de Coyuntura de la UBA*, even without the possibility of re-election, Cartes would be attempting to maintain his power inside the Colorado Party, "ensuring designation of his potential successor and at the same time, managing to weaken Senator Benítez, his main internal opponent."

In reality, the president would be showing that he has lost his nose for politics, and with it, he lost his way.

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