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Deep Divisions, Disillusionment Linger After Failed Power Play in Paraguay

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In the last week of March, the two biggest names in Paraguayan politics—President Horacio Cartes and his predecessor, Fernando Lugo (2008-2012)—used all the power at their disposal to force their way into next year’s general election despite being constitutionally barred from competing. They failed, leaving the country submerged in chaos and compromising its precarious stability.

To seek a second term, Cartes and Lugo would have to either ignore or amend an imprecise, 35-word section in the Constitution known as Article 229. Lugo and half of the country’s constitutional lawyers argue that Lugo should be allowed to seek a new term because he is not the sitting president. Cartes and the rest of the legal experts say the text should be amended so that the current leader can also run again ([NotiSur, Dec. 9, 2016](#)).

The situation came to a head when lawmakers from both sides formed an alliance to force an amendment through and “correct” the Constitution. The conspiring senators hail from the governing Asociación Nacional Republicana-Partido Colorado (National Republican Association-Colorado Party, ANR-PC), from a sector of the opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (Authentic Liberal Radical Party, PLRA), and from Lugo’s Frente Guasú (Guasú Front, FG) coalition.

As a first step, on March 28, the group carried out a “mini-coup” by approving rules changes that would allow them to force a vote on the proposed amendment despite opposition by the Senate president, the person normally responsible for deciding which items can go to the full Senate floor. As a next step, on March 31, the same lawmakers met in secret outside Congress and, with 25 of the Senate’s 45 members present, pushed the amendment through to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress.

When word of the development went public, a crowd of approximately 2,000 people gathered outside the Congress building in Asunción, the Paraguayan capital. A smaller group advanced toward the building, making it past a large but suspiciously passive security force.

Within a few minutes, the offices of the senators were literally destroyed as flames partially engulfed the building’s first three floors. Afterwards, and without having intervened or arrested a single one of the attackers, the police turned their attention to the street protesters, who then stormed the PLRA’s central headquarters, where a 25-year-old party activist, Rodrigo Quintana, was killed. The chaos continued in the days that followed.

‘Paraguay burns’

“What was going on with the police?” asked Osvaldo Zayas, an analyst with the alternative news site E’a. “Where did this group of people so determined to challenge the parliamentary coup come from? Who were those hundred or so people who did whatever they pleased while anti-riot forces and mounted police looked on passively?” The New York Times reported on the events as well.

“Paraguay arde ante las maniobras de su clase política” (Paraguay Burns over Maneuvers by its Political Class) read the headline of an April 1, Spanish-language article by journalist Santi Carneri.

Images broadcast live by television networks showed infuriated people hurling rocks, breaking windows, and destroying documents while tall flames began to devour the bottom part of the Congress building, located in Asunción’s historic city center, across from the Plaza de Armas. Zayas, who witnessed the events, said there was a large deployment of police present and that firefighters were late to arrive.

Afterwards, Pope Francis spoke with Cartes and proposed launching immediate round-table talks involving all the pertinent players. After three meetings in which only the government participated, the dialogue route was abandoned. Still, the Vatican did manage to get Cartes to drop his reelection bid.

The US government applied pressure as well, first through an April 1 press release from its embassy in Asunción expressing agreement with the anti-amendment sector, and later through a visit to the country, on April 18, by Francisco Palmieri, the acting assistant secretary in the US Department of State’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

US authorities insisted at first that the visit had nothing to do with the crisis. But Palmieri seemed to suggest otherwise by visiting the PLRA officers were Quintana was killed, and by reiterating the Department of State’s official position that “problems should be resolved without violence and in accordance with the Constitution.” A week later, on April 25, the Chamber of Deputies voted against the bill amending Article 229.

Deepening discord

The debate over reelection has had, and will continue to have, repercussions for the political parties and their leading figures. But it’s also clear that the players in this political drama didn’t gauge the damage they were doing to society. Political analysts are describing Paraguay now as a fragmented country. As journalist Miguel López said, the personal ambitions of Cartes and Lugo ended up widening the grieta (rift), a term coined by the government in neighboring Argentina to describe deepening social and political divisions there.

The debate over reforming the Constitution—either by an amendment or via a Constituent Assembly—has divided the Paraguayan political class into two distinct camps since late 2015. One includes backers of the amendment, namely the rightist ANR-PC, or Colorados, as they’re known; a dissident sector of the PLRA; and the FG. The other, which opposes the amendment, includes Colorado dissidents, PLRA regulars, and a collection of small centrist and left-wing groups and parties. “What a farce,” López wrote. “This is a fight between mafias to hold on to power.”

The journalist Andrés Colmán Gutiérrez was one of the first to point out just how fragmented the country has become. “The crisis divides people and turns life-long friends against each other, people who’d fought for the same cause, left-wing militants, right-wing militants, colleagues, family members,” he wrote in an article published April 7 by the Uruguayan weekly Brecha.

“People who had strong emotional attachments attack each other now with insults and threats on social media and in Messenger or WhatsApp groups,” he went on to say. “They delete or block each other from their Twitter accounts, or on Facebook, all depending on what opinion the other has regarding the amendment. They throw around terms like ‘violator of the Constitution,’ ‘rats of the

oligarchy,' 'murderers,' 'narcoterrorists,' and 'media assassins' in a fight that is creating walls of intolerance that rise higher and higher, shutting off all possibility of reflection and dialogue."

Let down by Lugo

López, Colmán Gutiérrez, and many other analysts are particularly critical of Lugo, perhaps because they were once sympathetic toward the former president, who was ousted five years ago in a parliamentary coup ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012](#)). Or because, at least some of them, were members of the FG. Or because, they say, they represent the 52% of Paraguayans who in recent polls have said they were likely to vote for Lugo. How is it possible, they ask, for Lugo to join the right in a campaign to amend the Constitution when he had always publicly opposed that option? Many Paraguayans had seen Lugo as the only candidate capable of defeating the right, as he had done when he ran for president in 2008. His current position, they conclude, is simply schizophrenic.

"The strategy was that Lugo would continue opposing the amendment while the Frente Guasú's four senators entered into a pact with the rightist Colorados and with the followers of Sen. Blas Llano (leader of the PLRA dissidents) to push for the amendment, with the argument that the former bishop [Lugo] is the only socialist option capable of taking on and beating the neoliberal model of the Colorados," Colmán Gutiérrez wrote in trying to explain the "aberrant attitudes" of Lugo and the FG.

"Cartes and Llano were the two principal figures behind the 2012 coup that ousted Lugo," the journalist went on to say. "But in the face of constant criticism for the incoherence of allying himself with his tormentors, the former bishop responded like a good Catholic, saying 'the time for forgiveness' had arrived."

Lugo made the remark as part of a "peace message" he delivered to followers in Coronel Oviedo, a city in the center of the country, approximately 130 km from Asunción.

The odd thing about this debate is that no one seems to remember that besides orchestrating the coup against Lugo, the Partido Colorado is also the only political group with a record of offering civilian support to the bloody dictatorship (1954-1989) of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner.

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