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Paraguay's 2018 Presidential Race Encumbered by Shady Deal-Making

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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With both major parties apparently irreconcilably divided internally, Paraguay completed all steps on the timetable leading to the April 22 election of the president, legislators, and governors. However, no one dares to guess who the winners will be.

Based on a legally questionable interpretation of Article 229 of the Constitution, which rules out the reelection of sitting presidents but not of former ones, Paraguay's electoral authority, the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE), blocked former president Fernando Lugo from running for president, saying it would be a reelection bid. Lugo took office in 2008 and was overthrown in 2012.

In April, after the TSJE ruling, Congress gave the reelection bid a green light in a shady arrangement between Lugo's Frente Guasú and current President Horacio Cartes' Partido Colorado (PC). This move set off strong popular protests and led both Lugo and Cartes—who had also planned to run, under the same agreement—to pull out of the race. The crisis resulted in a police break-in of the headquarters of the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA); in the death of one of the PLRA's youth leaders; and in the exile of four activists to Uruguay, the country's first political refugees since the return to democracy in 1989 ([NotiSur, May 26, 2017](#)).

Celebrity candidates

Cartes' and Lugo's decisions not to run opened the way for minor leaders and entertainment figures who had never participated in politics to appear on the scene. Such candidates have been efficient vote getters in other countries of the region.

When he was still thinking about running, Cartes had turned to those types of characters, much in the same way that Brazil's right-wing parties, and Argentina's former President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and President Mauricio Macri, tempted star athletes with legislative and governmental jobs and diplomatic posts. Cartes had set his sights on Rubén Rodríguez, aka El Pionero, a prominent figure in the department of Central, the country's largest electoral district. Rodríguez's popularity stems from a broadcast career that includes 44 years on the radio and 38 years on television, as well as a long history as an emcee at social events. However, in June, Rodríguez had to abandon Cartes and renounce his political aspirations after he admitted publicly that the president had promised to pay him an extra salary out of his own pocket during his years as governor if he won the election over the liberal opposition.

The political world was nonplused when Rodríguez announced he would run, as his candidacy was seen as a clever ploy by Cartes to bolster the Partido Colorado in a department that until now has been an impregnable fiefdom of the PLRA.

Analyst Alfredo Boccia warned that this practice is a dangerous trend that leads to the degradation of politics and democracy.

“It is a phenomenon that grows with the protection of political parties that have ceased to develop leaders and thus need candidates who emerge randomly, coming out of a vaudeville theater, a neighborhood club, or anywhere they have public exposure,” he said. Boccia said it wouldn’t be a surprise, “when the media stars and ballerinas end up disappointing the citizens, if candidates came from other fields ... because just as the public got fed up with politicians, they could tire of the celebrities, and then we could begin to have soccer players and other athletes” running for office.

He wasn’t mistaken. A short time later, José Luis Chilavert, a soccer goalie who once symbolized the sport in Paraguay and professes extreme right-wing ideas, was tempted into politics.

Political maneuvering

On December 2016, Cartes pressured the TSJE to rule against the possibility of a Lugo candidacy. Then, as today’s polls indicate—even after his decision not to run, there wasn’t another candidate in a position to defeat Lugo. What Cartes needed was for the tribunal, which does not have jurisdiction to interpret the Constitution, to rule in line with his interests. Article 229 of the Constitution states, “the president and vice president will serve for five years with no extension, starting from Aug. 15 following the elections, and they cannot in any case be reelected...”

Lugo relied on the analysis of the experts to argue that he could run without it being considered a bid for reelection because he was overthrown by a coup d’état in 2012, 14 months before the end of his term. Furthermore, according to constitutionalists of different political tendencies, Lugo’s bid cannot be considered a reelection because he has been away from the presidency for several years and the Constitution speaks of current presidents, not former presidents. That’s what his lawyer used to argue that Lugo was qualified to run.

In the most recent internal newsletter published by Frente Guasú, the party’s secretary for international relations, Ricardo Canese, argued that when Cartes got the TSJE to issue a ruling to prevent Lugo from conducting campaign activities, the period of “corrections and reclamations” when a candidate for public office can be challenged hadn’t begun. The ruling was made in December 2016, whereas the corrections period is in January. Canese said the December challenge was an unconstitutional prior restraint. “If it were a soccer game, it could be said that the referee pulled a red card before the game began,” he said.

Along the Argentine border, where people follow events in Paraguay with special attention, Raúl Zaffaroni, a former member of Argentina’s Supreme Court and current member of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, told the daily *Página 12* that the prohibition turned Lugo into a victim of a “judicial Plan Cóndor,” in reference to the coordinated repressive tactics that Southern Cone dictators used in the 1960s and ’70s ([NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2009](#), and [Feb. 3, 2017](#)). Zaffaroni said the Paraguayan election tribunal had overreached its jurisdiction.

“This new Plan Cóndor, now judicial, seeks to use the courts to eliminate any popular leader capable of beating candidates of the corporations from all electoral contests,” Zaffaroni said. “What’s needed for that is an adequate number of obedient judges who can be manipulated by intelligence services and transnational managers and agents such as the media.” Lugo, he said, is “a victim of the corporate totalitarianism imposed on our countries, which, at the same time, works to degrade politics and put transnational CEOs in his place.”

Spanish award criticized

Members of the opposition in Paraguay echoed the Argentine jurist, also putting Plan Cóndor at the center of political conversation, albeit for different reasons.

They took issue with an award granted by the Spanish government, the Cross of the Order of Queen Isabella, to Foreign Relations Minister Eladio Loizaga. The honor is generally given to those who have helped improve relations with Spain and worked to strengthen democratic sentiment. The Frente Guasú and 10 other citizen organizations, including those made up of relatives of the victims of the dictatorship, said Loizaga meets the first criteria, but in regards to democracy, “he always was in the wrong.”

Loizaga was a government official for over a decade during Gen. Alfredo Stroessner’s bloody civil-military regime (1954-1989). Until 1981, and during all the Plan Cóndor years, he served as the dictatorship’s director of the department in charge of international treaties (Departamento de Organismos, Tratados y Actos Internacionales) and then as director of foreign affairs.

The award was also criticized in Spain, where the Spanish jurist Baltasar Garzón said he was “enraged” by what he called an event of utmost seriousness—particularly in light of Spain’s role in the fight against impunity and its defense of those who suffered human rights abuses by dictatorships in the Plan Cóndor countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay). Although the Cartes administration may deserve Madrid’s respect, he said, “it is clear that it does not deserve any honor, and certainly Loizaga does not. That he was given the award is an insult to thousands of victims and a paradox that, as Spaniards, we can’t allow because, it involves someone who has a highly questionable past for which he is politically responsible.”

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