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Andrés Gaudín

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Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo Toppled in Parliamentary Coup

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo was overthrown on June 22, after governing democratically for 46 months in which he had to deal with daily destabilization efforts and after receiving 22 impeachment threats, thwarting three conspiracies, and being on the receiving end of a wave of 97 legal complaints for never-proven allegations. In just 30 hours, the Congress "dismissed" him, if one accepts that the summary impeachment to which he was subjected has any constitutional validity, or they "overthrew" him, if one agrees with the view of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the region's two most representative integration organizations.

On June 21, the lower-house deputies decided to impeach Lugo for a series of vague reasons—promoting the unionization of campesinos, trying to implement a "confiscatory" agrarian-reform program, and failing to take measures to protect citizen security—going so far as to describe as an "aberrant act" the signing of a democracy clause established by members of MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay).

The document sent to the Senate, which acts as a tribunal in impeachment processes, said that "all the grounds mentioned above are public information and therefore do not have to be proven, according to the existing legal system." Thus, the deputies claimed that the grounds for impeachment have merit because they were printed in the newspapers. The Senate received the list of charges the same afternoon, met, and decided on the timetable by which, the next day, Lugo's "execution" would be carried out.

The rightist daily ABC Color, reportedly one of the instigators of the fall of the constitutional government, praised the legislators, saying, "The deputies and senators have never acted with such speed and effectiveness."

The final phase was set to begin at midday on June 22. For the first 90 minutes, the president could present his defense. Then, for the next 120 minutes, the committee calling for impeachment could present its case. Finally, the full Senate would "vote to convict," meaning it would vote to remove the president, the only president in the last 23 years who, it was believed, would finish his constitutional term. As it happened, when the session was convoked, it was leaked that Lugo would be removed. At 4:30 pm, the president was overthrown.

On 22 occasions, the right had tried to oust the progressive government using the same recourse that, in the end, it was able to put into practice ([NotiSur, Feb. 19, 2010](#)). All those cases failed, but they had two points in common. First, the inconsistency in the supposed grounds for impeachment. (The first attempt, only eight months after Lugo took office, was pushed by the Partido Colorado on the grounds that a woman claimed that the president was the father of one of her children [[NotiSur, May 1, 2009](#)] conceived when Lugo was still a Catholic bishop.) Second, behind all the efforts to get rid of Lugo was Vice President Federico Franco, who arrogantly offered to replace him. Now he has

succeeded, although if the constitutional term is upheld, it will be for only 13 months. He must call elections for April 21, 2013, and turn the presidency over to the winner the following August.

Almost all South American countries and most analysts believe that this time, with such experience and Franco's "willingness," a more consistent scenario was put together. The results are now there for all to see.

Suspicious of setup

Since early June, a group of more than 100 campesinos has occupied some 2,800 hectares of government lands illegally acquired and exploited by former Colorado senator Blas Riquelme, one of the country's large-scale soy growers. Riquelme and other soy growers complained that the occupiers incited violence and are supported by the illusory Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), which many believe does not exist but whom the landowners accuse of a never-proven series of kidnappings for money ([NotiSur, May 14, 2010](#)). The occupied lands are in Curuguaty, 380 km northeast of the capital Asunción.

Lugo fell into their trap and on June 15 sent a contingent of 300 police to dislodge the occupiers. Previously, they would have had to adhere to the "procedural protocol," a law implemented by the progressive government establishing that, when faced with social conflicts, the police could not act without first exhausting all avenues for dialogue, in this case with the campesinos.

But the police had barely arrived at the place when they were met with gunfire. Two hours later, when the gunfire stopped, six police and 11 campesinos were dead and another 46 were injured. The private Canal 13 television station investigated and found evidence of a setup: the campesinos did not fire nor did they have the type of automatic weapons that killed the police, there were hidden snipers, and the supposed presence of the EPP was nonexistent. The Canal 13 video footage is dramatic.

On July 4, Interior Minister Carmelo Caballero had to admit that the EPP's presence was an invention. "No elements were found that would allow a presumption of that group's presence in Curuguaty," said the minister of the de facto regime.

Why the rush to impeach?

Why such a rush to overthrow the president, when a new president was to be elected within 10 months and to take office in 13 months? There are political reasons. At least today, none of the opposition parties has a contender that could successfully compete against any candidate backed by Lugo. Various polls indicate that the candidate chosen by the now-overthrown president has about 50% of voter preference, while no potential opposition candidate has more than 20%. In addition, there are neither intentions nor possibilities of coming up with a unified rightist candidate.

There are also economic reasons, basically land ownership, an issue that Lugo wanted to address with the agrarian reform but was unable to do so ([NotiSur, Feb. 25, 2011](#)). The cold numbers explain it. An investigation released in 2008 by the Comisión de Verdad y Justicia indicated that, during the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), friends of the regime were illegally given 6.75 million hectares of land and, in the 15 years following the fall of the Stroessner regime, another million hectares were given away ([NotiSur, Feb. 17, 2012](#)). The ill-gotten lands represent 32.7% of all arable land and 19.3% of the national territory. Eighty-five percent of the best lands is in the hands of 2% of the population. Almost 60% of GDP originates in the rural areas, where 65% of the

employed work force is found. It is clear, then, why the agrarian reform annoyed rural business people and why the campesinos weigh so heavily in this crisis.

In the last week of Lugo's presidency, agribusiness interests were decisive. The same day as the tragic incidents provoked in Curuguaty, Héctor Cristaldo, president of the Coordinador Agrícola del Paraguay (CAP) and the Unión de Gremios del Paraguay (UGP), told the Associated Press that "rather than capturing and punishing them, Lugo protected the campesinos and even installed mobile schools, in tents, for their children."

The same day, the powerful business group Asociación Rural del Paraguay (ARP) released a statement saying, "It is urgent to impeach the president." The Unión Industrial Paraguaya (UIP) also called for "impeachment now." Enrique Vargas Peña, the most senior columnist for the Asunción daily La Nación, wrote on April 16, without subtlety, "Since Lugo has no intention of correcting his course, it is necessary to kick him out of government."

Pablo Stefanoni, editor of the magazine Nueva Sociedad, a publication financed by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, recalled on June 29 in an article in the Uruguayan magazine Brecha that complaints about coup preparations dated back to the beginning of the progressive government, tied to those corporate powers and the Partido Colorado—in reality all the parties with parliamentary representation, with the exception of the Tekojojá ("equality" in Guaraní), which has one senator. He said that the right invented the EPP guerrillas "to stir up terrorist ghosts and pressure the government." Stefanoni also recalled that the "rightist landowners and political leaders did not hold back in calls to organize private militias to defend themselves from "the terrorists" and "land occupiers."

In this coup in which there is no oil or strategic interests at play, "the hand of the US cannot be seen; it is the first imposed by agroexport interests and agroindustry, specifically soy growers," Sixto Pereira, the only pro-Lugo senator, told the Argentine daily Tiempo. "It is noteworthy, this is the first time that the US is not behind a democratic break in Latin America."

Stefanoni quotes a secret US State Department cable, dated March 28 2009, and released by WikiLeaks, which says that a plan already exists to overthrow Lugo "as soon as he makes a mistake" and that the plot aims to put Franco in the presidency. The "mistake" was prepared, and it was the massacre of campesinos and police in Curuguaty. "Despite the US's open sympathies for Franco," says Stefanoni, "this coup seems to have more to do with internal causes and brutal forms of vying for power than with the classic CIA coup."

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