

Paraguay at the Crossroads

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Diego Abente Brun: Paraguay at the Crossroads

When, eighteen years ago, the dictatorship of General Stroessner came to an end in Paraguay, the country opened up for democracy. However, the path is stony, and there still is reason for concern. At this point, it is worth while to take a look into the past.

The rule of Alfredo Stroessner was no purely military dictatorship, no purely despotic regime and no pure one-party dominance. Rather, it was based – in equal measure – on the military, the party, and the person of the General himself as the supreme arbiter, who coordinated the pillars of power to safeguard his position. In the Paraguay of Mr Stroessner, everybody who wanted to occupy a public or military office, become a police officer, or obtain an order from the state had to be a member of the party. The General endeavoured to establish his legitimacy by integrating certain players in his pseudo-democratic game.

It comes as a surprise that it is the Partido Colorado, the party Mr Stroessner relied on for almost two decades, that remained in power in Paraguay. Nevertheless, democracy has also brought positive developments. By now, free and orderly elections are as much part of reality as respect for public liberties and the appearance of new societal and political players, such as trade unions and political parties.

As the political system has changed, the consequences of democracy make themselves felt everywhere. However, democracy in Paraguay is of low quality and the threats it is facing – from the ruling government, for example – are immense. Political practice in Paraguay not only contributes towards the poor quality of democracy, it is also the reason why the political and socio-economic performance of the country ranks among the worst in Latin America except for a few data, such as the the coefficient of unemployment in the cities. Things do not look much different for the indicators of legitimacy, which show the deficient performance of the system particularly well, and those for the judiciary and the generally widespread problem of corruption reflect a similar picture.

The desolate data on democracy in Paraguay give rise to some questions: Why does its democracy achieve so little compared with other countries in the region? And what are the reasons for it? There are two explanations: One is based on the quality of governmental policy, the other on the nature of the political process itself.

The general pessimism prevailing among the population of this South American country was certainly not caused by a coincidence but by the pathetic policies of the governments that have been in power over the last fifteen years. The message of the development indicators is clear: The per-capita gross national product has decreased, and economic productivity and competitiveness are declining. Poverty is spreading and, as a result of the economic and social degradation, the informal economy is on the rise, including piracy and smuggling as well as drug trafficking and money-laundering. On the other hand, national expenditures have increased: The number of public servants

is high, and educational expenditures are growing beyond all bounds. The actions of Paraguay's politicians may certainly be criticised; however, they are shored up by a scaffolding of indicators which make poor results such as these possible in the first place.

Another factor which explains the weakness of Paraguay's democracy is the political process there. One of the characteristics of the country's policy is its fragile backbone. Detached from societal and economic structures, the political sphere acts without regard to institutions. Its representatives do not strive for power to conduct a certain policy; rather, they develop a certain policy to obtain power, or to retain it. Therefore, Paraguay's traditional political parties – the Asociación Nacional Republicana, the Partido Colorado, and the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico – are neither explicitly conservative nor progressive; rather, they change their position depending on what they consider the best tactic to win an election. The newer parties – especially the Encuentro Nacional, the País Solidario, and the Patria Querida – are more modern and are endeavouring to establish relations with stakeholder groups. Even so, the Partido Colorado and the Partido Liberal together retain up to 85 percent of the vote.

Paraguay's politicians are not so much interested in mediating and harmonising economic and social interests but in gaining wealth and power through the parties. From this dominance of party structures, three consequences arise: First, particularist logic predominates over universalist logic; second, opportunism predominates over the appreciation of fairness; and third, the pursuit of quick profits predominates over endeavours to improve the well-being of the population.

First: While the catch-all parties and those promoting a certain world view sponsor collectives and redistribution and, when in power, favour regulation and universalism, clientele parties subscribe to individualism, distribution and, as holders of power, particularism. Moreover, the parties that promote a certain world view generally present themselves as progressive, pro-labour, and in favour of the discriminated. Clientele parties, on the other hand, like to appear conservative and populist, pro-business and person-oriented.

Second: The fact that the parties tend to woo voters from any likely group irrespective of the priorities of the governmental policy renders them vulnerable to pressure from organised groups with a collective identity. These collective players do not interact with other collective players but with the state. They demand higher salaries and more privileges. Here, the clientele parties are the ones which, as parties of distribution, invariably give in to such demands. Politics revolves around the two axes of patron-client and agent-company relationships. In both cases, demands call for distribution and are satisfied at the expense of the state. Thus, the state is predator and prey at the same time, as Bartomeu Melià argues.

Third: Once the state is reduced to handing out privileges, the parties step up their profit-oriented activities vis-a-vis other powerful players. Thus, industry associations can talk of a free market while at the same time demanding that the state protect their interests. It is striking that in this climate, everybody praises democracy: It appears to be the only system in which they all can survive and enhance their power.

It seems that Paraguay is caught up in a vicious circle, and it is difficult to make any predictions about the future of the country. One possibility is that the Partido Colorado remains in power and operates as before, another, that the time is ripe for the populists and their promises of salvation.

However, the fact that, after the assassination of Luís María Argaña in 1999 and Lino Oviedo's downfall, President Duarte Fruto was able to expand his power further might offer a new outlook on the future of the Partido Colorado, which gives rise to both hope and fear at the same time: Having

focussed on party loyalty in the public administration, the submission of the judiciary under political control, and other measures that strengthened his authority, Mr Duarte now seems to have overstepped the mark. In a protest march organised by the former bishop of San Pedro, Fernando Lugo, under the motto 'Dictadura nunca más', 40,000 people came together, and Mr Lugo, who by now has resigned from his office as priest, became the icon of the resistance movement against the Fruto government almost overnight.

With Mr Lugo, who is supported by the newly-established leftist movement, Tekojojá, an opponent of the current leadership has entered Paraguay's political sphere who should be taken seriously. Although the political and ideological profile of the former bishop remains unclear, and the question of how to bring his camp into line with that of the opposition parties remains unsolved, there is no doubt about the attraction Mr Lugo has for many Paraguayans.

One legal question remains to be clarified: To the Catholic church, Mr Lugo still is a priest, but the former bishop and the opposition emphasise that canonical law is not part of the the republic's legal system; thus, according to legal standards, Mr Lugo no longer is a man of the cloth after his resignation. Should Mr Lugo be given the opportunity to stand for president after this question has been solved, it remains to be seen whether the movement triggered by him has the power to make a political transformation come true. Paraguay is at the crossroads once again – that much may be said.