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## PARAGUAY AFTER STROESSNER

**C**ontrary to most predictions, General Alfredo Stroessner's 35-year rule as dictator of land-locked Paraguay ended abruptly in a violent coup d'état. The world had become so accustomed to the taciturn and repressive ruler that it was generally assumed he would escape the fate of his fellow despots in the western hemisphere—Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Augusto Pinochet in Chile—and leave office at a moment of his own choosing or die in bed with his boots on. Instead, early on February 3, 1989, he fell victim to a squabble among the thieves without honor who dominate Paraguay. With the fall of Stroessner, the hemisphere's most durable remaining dictator is the more charismatic but no less authoritarian Fidel Castro.

In contrast to his fellow dictators, Stroessner did not fall before the inexorable force of social revolution as did Somoza; nor did he die at the hands of disaffected members of his own security apparatus as was the fate of Trujillo. And unlike Pinochet, who has apparently if reluctantly bowed to the outcome of an honest plebiscite, Stroessner never dreamed of participating in a transition to democracy. There is a strong sense of continuity in the transfer of power that has occurred in Asunción; little is going to change in the short run.

Stroessner's replacement, General Andrés Rodríguez, is cut from the same cloth. Sixty-five years old, he served as second-in-command of the army after Stroessner and had close ties to the dictator and his family. After a split among Stroessner's supporters, Rodríguez responded to a threat to his own power by leading the coup against the dictator. There is no evidence that the two men differed on either ideology or specific government goals. Rodríguez had survived, very comfortably, throughout the dictatorship as one of its chief beneficiaries and as one of Stroessner's principal sources of support. Upon assuming power, however, Rodríguez quickly attempted to

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refurbish his public image with promises of democracy and respect for human rights. The general “permitted” his name to be put forward as the candidate of the long-ruling Colorado Party in the May 1 national elections.

However similar the two men’s backgrounds, the despotic Stroessner era is over and it will be all but impossible to recreate *Stroessnismo* without the general. The interesting questions are whether forces will be unleashed in the foreseeable future to change the current equation of power in Paraguay, or whether a geriatric political elite can continue to convince the majority of Paraguayans that the absence of democracy is a necessary price that must be paid for continued social “peace” and political stability.

## II

Even by the bizarre standards of Latin America’s post-colonial history, Paraguay stands apart. The early patterns of Paraguayan political culture help provide a general framework for understanding why General Stroessner survived as long as he did and why the likelihood of immediate change is low. For better or worse, Stroessner’s accession to power in 1954 fitted comfortably with the authoritarian tradition of the small country. The figure of the patriarch has been a familiar, if forbidding, reality in Paraguay’s nearly two centuries of independence.

Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Spain and Portugal in the first decade of the nineteenth century unleashed a process of change in Latin America that continues today. As Spain’s empire in the New World fragmented, tiny Paraguay was a relatively insignificant outpost on the river of the same name, upstream from Buenos Aires. In the territorial sorting-out of the various Spanish viceroalties, Buenos Aires, the seat of the last vicerealty created by Spain, attempted to force Asunción to join the emerging state of Argentina. Paraguayan forces fought successfully to repel the Argentines, establishing an important attribute of modern Paraguay: its fierce resistance to domination by its neighbors.

The new state fell under the domination of a dictatorial savant, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, from 1814 until 1840. Dr. Francia, as he was known, undertook a policy of geographical isolation to quarantine the country from outside interference. The dictator imposed policies that produced an economically self-sufficient Paraguay; visitors were unwelcome

and diplomatic relations with the outside world were deemed unimportant. Francia also forced the small surviving colonial elite to intermarry with the country's humble folk; he dominated the Roman Catholic Church, placed the armed forces under his personal command, and created a variant of state socialism in the southern cone. When the "dictator for life" died peacefully in 1840, the country's independence was a given, and its racial and social homogeneity was the most pronounced in the Americas.

Francia was succeeded by Carlos Antonio López and he by his son, Francisco Solano, known as "the Marshal." The father began the modernization of Paraguay, again under dictatorial auspices, and opened the country to the world. The son, whom many saw as a megalomaniac, attempted to expand the state's role in the affairs of the southern cone (in addition to Paraguay, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay) and precipitated a war with the latter three. After five years of fierce battle the war ended in 1870, the Marshal was dead, and the country was decimated and occupied by Brazil. Half of the country's population had been wiped out; tens of thousands of square miles of national territory were lost; and the occupying forces imposed a heavy indemnity. But, once again, the Paraguayans had demonstrated their will to fight for independence—whatever the cost.

Under the tutelage of the occupying Brazilians a constitution was written in 1870, formally based on the liberal ideas in the French and American constitutions but with little application to devastated, occupied Paraguay. A president acceptable to Brazil was elected by the constitutional convention. Two political parties—the Colorados and the Liberals—emerged, and a new chapter of violence and coups d'état began. The Colorados were identified as the guardians of the spirit of the Marshal; the Liberals were branded as collaborationists who had worked with the Triple Alliance which had defeated Paraguay. The actual differences had little to do with ideology and a great deal to do with personality and family. Thus began a tradition where an individual was born into a political party and assumed all of the prejudices and experiences of his or her family.

In the next few decades the most important segments of the rudimentary national economy were bought out by foreign interests. The Colorados ruled, with Brazil's endorsement, until 1904. Sharing power never occurred to the caudillo-like leaders of the party. With Argentine encouragement the Lib-

erals unceremoniously overthrew the Colorados in 1904. Under Liberal rule into the 1930s, the country gained a sheen of middle-class respectability. Asunción was urbanized, educational opportunities expanded, and political life, for Paraguay, was relatively tranquil. But it was a brittle and superficial artifice.

Paraguay girded for war again in 1932. This time the challenge came from Bolivia, the only other land-locked country on the continent, over the Chaco, the desert-like western half of Paraguay. This area, whose boundaries have shifted frequently, has been the subject of contention among the southern cone countries for decades. In the 1920s it had become of increasing economic importance with the growth of cattle ranching and forestry opportunities. The discovery of petroleum in Bolivia increased the Chaco's significance as a transshipment route to the sea. Bolivia's goal was a fluvial route to Buenos Aires via the Paraguay-Paraná river system. The war raged for three years. A truce in 1935 and a final peace treaty in 1938 favored Paraguay, whose warlike image was once again enhanced.

The Chaco War precipitated an era of social upheaval and political mobilization. A vision of a new Paraguay erupted among the workers, intellectuals, students and returning war veterans. The Liberal regime, uncertain about how to respond, did nothing and paid the price. A coup d'état in 1936 installed one of the war's heroes as president. After a brief period of chaotic social reform, Colonel Rafael Franco, the hapless leader, lost his job in August 1937. The Liberals regained political power and picked their own Chaco War hero as the party candidate in the 1939 national elections, Marshal José Félix Estigarribia. The marshal carried the election, amid continuing social ferment, and declared a personalist dictatorship in 1940 within a vaguely corporatist constitutional framework. He died in a plane crash before he could prove whether the new order would succeed or not.

Estigarribia was succeeded by his war minister, Higinio Morínigo. Paraguay sat out the Second World War under a traditional, and openly pro-Axis, dictatorship. There was widespread admiration for the efficiency and early successes of the Nazi dictatorship among Paraguay's military high command. Hitler's espionage and propaganda activities in the 1930s had received a warm welcome among the German immigrant colony in Paraguay. Sympathy for the Axis powers was widespread

in neighboring Argentina and Brazil in the 1930s and continued into the war years throughout the southern cone.

After the war Morínigo allowed exiles to return and formed a coalition government with the Febrerista and Colorado Parties, but a civil war broke out in 1947. The Colorados supported the benighted president and carried the day, defeating the Liberals and their allies, and then overthrew Morínigo. One-party rule returned with a series of Colorado presidents. The party fragmented in the early 1950s over personalities and spoils, and one group identified an ambitious and useful army officer as its ticket to power—General Alfredo Stroessner—the armed forces' commander in chief, then 42 years old.

### III

The Colorados and Alfredo Stroessner were a marriage made in heaven. After a brief period of driving dissenters into exile, establishing his personal authority over all of the major institutions in society and turning over the government and its widespread patronage to the Colorados, Stroessner settled down for his long rule. Through a judicious mix of bribes, repression and *pater familias* politics, Stroessner emerged as the undisputed leader of Paraguay. With the passing years, the general grew more popular, on the evidence of his uncontested reelection every few years as president of the republic. By the time the general was reelected for an eighth term of office in 1988, few seemed to bother counting.

From time to time the general responded to pressures for liberalization. After Stroessner's election to a third term, the constitution was amended in 1967 by a docile legislature to allow him to stand again as a candidate. The constitutional convention included two recently legalized political parties, the Radical Liberal Party, the principal descendant of the once-powerful Liberal Party, and the Revolutionary Febrerista Party, the party that had led the 1936 revolt against the Liberal elite. In return for their agreement to allow Stroessner's candidacy, the Liberals were rewarded with 20 seats in the 60-member legislature.

The general's formula for retaining power was simple. He and his cronies co-opted potential opposition or repressed it, often brutally. The Colorado Party dominated civil society and the government at every level, with the armed forces maintaining law and order. Stroessner presided over both institutions, manipulating personalities, bestowing favors and reinforcing



his image as the irreplaceable national leader who had ended civil war and restored social harmony to conflictual Paraguay. His astute balancing of Argentina and Brazil appeared to guarantee the country's geographical identity, although the general was known to favor Brazil in regional geopolitics. Stroessner, from all that we can tell, slowly emerged as a distant but popular leader with the Paraguayan peasantry, the lower-middle class and, of course, the sycophants in the government bureaucracy and military.

After decades of immobilism the late 1970s and early 1980s were dominated by new developments. Some were political: the emergence, for the first time in Paraguay's recent history, of a relatively coherent opposition movement and a split in the ruling Colorado Party. Both events opened a slight possibility of change. Another development was rapid economic growth resulting primarily from the construction of the Itaipu hydroelectric dam, a joint venture with Brazil and the largest project of its kind in the world. Contraband trade in a wide variety of goods, including drugs, also increased. This boosted the stagnant economy, but the bubble burst in the early 1980s. All these political and economic changes created a feeling of uncertainty about the future that surfaced in the mid-1980s; this anxiety within the prevailing power structure led to the coup against Stroessner in 1989.

The development of the Paraguayan economy in the 1970s proved to be unsettling. Paraguay is an agricultural society; even in the late 1980s soya and cotton still accounted for more than 60 percent of the value of the country's official exports. The formal economy expanded rapidly in the 1970s. The average yearly growth rate was eight percent, with agriculture and construction the leading sectors. Farm production increased because the agricultural frontier expanded rapidly.

With the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the Paraguayan government began resettling local farmers, many of whom were squatters, which led to a wave of protests from longtime settlers being driven from their lands. The expansion also attracted a number of Brazilian and Japanese farmers, who had access to outside financing. A modern highway and bridge and port facilities were constructed by Brazil in the 1970s, greatly facilitating the economic integration of Paraguay with its dynamic neighbor and reducing its traditional dependence on Argentina as a trade route.

The surge in construction was due to major investments in

infrastructure, primarily the Itaipu hydroelectric power project with Brazil. An agreement was signed in 1973 between the two governments to erect the world's largest dam on the Paraná River. This project created diplomatic conflict among Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Argentina saw the handwriting on the wall: Brazil's agreement with Paraguay, combined with the expanding agricultural frontier oriented to Brazil, would dramatically reduce Argentina's commercial links to Paraguay. The dam also threatened Argentina's downstream hydroelectric potential. The differences over electric power generation were settled peacefully, although clearly favoring Brazil's expanding role in Paraguay and adjacent areas of the heartland of South America.

Itaipu created an enormous amount of employment. Thousands of Paraguayans were directly employed in the dam's construction. The generation of significant excess power that Paraguay could resell to Brazil promised a windfall for the limited reserves of the Stroessner regime. The Itaipu project, and the improved land connection with Brazil, led to an influx of Brazilian capital into Paraguay in the 1970s, competing with traditional Argentine investment in land and extractive industries. Commercial banks expanded their operations in Paraguay, with the Bank of Brazil assuming a prominent position. Large amounts of foreign exchange permitted the import of a variety of consumer goods for the first time, and the middle class expanded.

In the early to mid-1980s, however, the economy slowed. The Itaipu construction was completed and the preparatory work for the construction of the Yacyreta hydroelectric project with Argentina neared completion. The agribusiness boom of the 1970s came to a halt as international commodity prices fell. The post-1982 world recession and the Latin American debt crisis reduced the overall level of investment and business activity throughout the hemisphere. The Paraguayan economy returned to heavy reliance on uncertain world demand for its agricultural goods. The net inflows from the Itaipu and Yacyreta projects, expected to peak at about \$180 million in 1991, have not compensated for import needs, debt servicing and the low level of hard currency reserves. Paraguay has been plagued since the early 1980s with a large public deficit, disparity between the official and the free exchange rates, and inflation. Lackluster government policymaking has contributed to the malaise. And, by the end of the 1980s, growing political disar-



ray in the official family effectively postponed serious economic readjustment.

The economic problems were accompanied by a growing realization that Stroessner was aging, and there was no clear successor. While the opposition was not strong, it was vocal and had gathered wide international support. The regime's human rights violations and the pressure from the U.S. embassy in Asunción to liberalize the regime were disconcerting even to some Colorado Party members. In 1987 the party split, in part because some wished to introduce modest administrative and economic reforms to shore up the future of the party after the departure of the general. It was apparent to most observers by 1988 that Stroessner cared little for day-to-day administrative chores, and thus decisions were left to party and government hacks with little sense of planning or development.

#### IV

A contributing, if minor, factor that added to the uncertainty about the future in Paraguay was the evolution of U.S. policy. As particularly Brazil, and Argentina to some degree, retained or increased their influence in Paraguay, the United States became more distant. It has few strategic interests at stake in Paraguay, and Stroessner was generally powerful enough to ignore American lobbying for change. Washington came to accept that Paraguay's neighbors ultimately would have a greater say in the country's future than would the United States. But it is nevertheless important to understand the limited role that the United States played in Paraguay to evaluate future efforts that might be taken to strengthen democratic forces and enhance respect for human rights and civil liberties.

U.S. interests in Paraguay have been intermittent and usually influenced by policy issues external to the country itself. The United States was involved in the negotiations to end the Chaco War in the 1930s, out of its general concern for security in the hemisphere prior to the Second World War. Although Paraguay remained neutral during World War II, the pro-Axis position of General Morínigo and most of the high command bothered Washington; still it was not a major threat to hemispheric solidarity.

With the onset of the cold war Stroessner quickly established his government as a fearless defender of America's containment policy. The United States had no more faithful supporter

in the United Nations and the Organization of American States than the Paraguayan delegation. In return, a friendly but watchful relationship began. It netted Paraguay, in the past three decades, over \$31 million in military aid, police training and matériel; since 1954 the government received more than \$240 million in U.S. economic and technical assistance. In turn, Paraguay remained a bulwark in the hemisphere's stand against international communism and internal subversion and staunchly protected direct foreign investment.

American pressure helped facilitate limited opposition participation in the 1963 elections, but the priority of the Alliance for Progress faded as America turned to Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Only with the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter in 1977 did the Stroessner regime find itself uncomfortably identified as a persistent violator of human rights. As a result of U.S. pressure many hundreds of political prisoners were released and the diplomatic discourse between the two capitals soured. The early Reagan years restored the status quo ante. In his second term, however, human rights became an issue once again. Successive American ambassadors, carrying out instructions from Washington, publicly supported political and social pluralism in Paraguay. The Paraguayan government responded with shocked and often obscene rejection of U.S. interference in its internal affairs. Yet many would argue that the persistent human rights criticism by the United States and international organizations was the single most effective means of pressuring the regime for change.

U.S. military and economic assistance had become minimal by the 1980s; Brazil was a far greater factor in Paraguay's future than the United States. The rest of Latin America was too concerned about other issues—debt, democracy, Nicaragua and Chile, to name but a few—to devote much time to the aging general and his sclerotic regime. In 1987 the United States withdrew trade benefits under the generalized system of preferences because of the Paraguayan government's refusal to grant minimal rights to organized labor. Last year Congress came close to decertifying Paraguay as a candidate for U.S. aid under the terms of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, even though the Reagan Administration had supported full certification on the grounds of "vital national interests." The 1988 report certified Paraguay but termed it one of a group of "close friends and allies" that needs to "do more" to cooperate with the United States. The expectation is that Congress will

give the Rodríguez regime the benefit of the doubt and the certification decision will stand for now.

U.S. concern with Paraguay's involvement in narcotics trade had begun in the early 1970s with the case of Auguste Joseph Ricord, a member of the "French Connection" of heroin traffickers who used Paraguay to transship the drug between Europe and the United States. After being tried and sentenced in the United States, Ricord ultimately returned to Paraguay to die of illness in 1985. In the early 1980s Paraguay became an important transshipment point for Bolivian cocaine bound for Europe and the United States. Chemicals for refining cocaine have also been captured in the possession of Paraguayan smugglers. The country is a major producer of marijuana, most of which is sold in Brazil, and is widely suspected to be a safe haven for the laundering of drug profits.

It became clear early on that officials in Paraguay, both civilian and military, were aware of and probably abetted and participated in the flourishing trafficking. Stroessner's laconic position appeared to be that his survival required payoffs for his supporters. By the 1980s the drug trade was one of the most lucrative and pervasive sources of illegal income, and party officials and military leaders were principal beneficiaries.

Contraband has been the most active informal activity in Paraguay for years. Smuggling is as old as the country itself; miles of sparsely populated frontier have made effective policing impossible. High tariffs and cumbersome trade procedures have provided a further incentive. But only in the last couple of decades has smuggling become institutionalized. Contraband trade is now so prominent that most Paraguayan and international balance-of-payment analyses give only slight attention to official export and import data.

In recent years whiskey, perfumes, electronic goods, drugs and arms have moved illegally but discreetly over the country's borders to earn an estimated \$1 billion a year—equal to about a quarter of the official gross domestic product of \$4 billion. General Stroessner is alleged to have assigned portions of the illegal contraband trade to key officials in the armed forces and the party in exchange for their continued support. Recent allegations openly discussed in the press, and attributed to officials in Washington, assert that General Andrés Rodríguez is deeply involved in general contraband activity, the drug trade and dubious financial transactions. The military, with responsibility for policing the borders and with access to small

airfields in the interior and control over the country's ports, was a prime candidate for a role in the expanding formal sector of the 1970s as well as the vigorous informal sector.

While Stroessner and Rodríguez and their henchmen have vehemently denied any knowledge of or participation in contraband and smuggling activities, the information gathered by U.S. drug enforcement agencies confirms the contrary. The accumulated wealth of the major figures in the regime and the demonstrable and dramatic escalation of contraband trade with Brazil in recent years are common knowledge; all but the most naïve observers accept the evidence that illegal smuggling is Paraguay's second economy and is controlled and/or protected by the most powerful individuals in Asunción.

## v

Nonetheless, Paraguay appeared tranquil in the mid-1980s. U.S. pressure for political liberalization had limited effect. The opposition grew more vocal but was no more effective in mobilizing wide opposition to the general. The close relationship of the Colorado Party and the army appeared secure. But, as is often the case, all was not as it seemed in Stroessner's Paraguayan paradise. As a result of pressure in the Alliance for Progress years, formal opposition had been introduced into the tightly controlled political system. In the years preceding Stroessner's overthrow, the political parties divided along a simple line—those that participated in elections and those that did not. Legal recognition was granted with great reluctance by the regime. In 1988 two small splinter parties with legal status participated in elections, the Liberal Radical Party and the Liberal Party. The third legally recognized party, the Febreristas, called for blank ballots in the 1988 presidential election and had boycotted previous elections.

The best-known opposition party is formally illegal but has operated publicly for a number of years. Led by Paraguay's most respected opposition figure, Dr. Domingo Laino, the Authentic Liberal Radical Party has become the conscience of modern society. Other groups—such as the Christian Democrats, the Popular Colorado Movement (MOPOCO), which split from the government party in 1959, and the new left-of-center Popular Democratic Movement—are poorly organized. It is impossible to judge the extent of popular support for any of the parties given the absence of an honest ballot at any time in Paraguay's history and the pervasive fear of the regime.

The Roman Catholic Church has grown in stature in recent years, although it lacks the credibility of the crusading Brazilian church or the courageous Chilean church. The church in Paraguay, reflecting the culture, is more removed from the center of political and social power. It is a poor church to boot, and probably strongest in the more traditional—and politically marginal—countryside. In recent years the church has been active in organizing “Christian Land Leagues” to resist tenant evictions, and the church’s radio station, Radio Caritas, has been a significant voice for the opposition. During the visit to Paraguay of Pope John Paul II in May 1988, the church attempted to use the pontiff’s presence to strengthen its call for human rights and social justice—a message that went unheeded in the presidential palace.

The regime played a cat-and-mouse game with the media for years. In addition to the popular Radio Nanduti, closed in 1987, the daily newspaper *ABC Color* was closed in March 1984. Both had represented sources of persistent criticism of the regime. The Febrerista newspaper, *El Pueblo*, performed a similar function but it, too, was shut in mid-1987. By early 1988 it was difficult to find a media outlet for opposition other than the church’s Radio Caritas and its weekly bulletin, *Sendero*. The international press and media assumed a growing role in raising the consciousness of the world about Paraguay’s plight. While the regime freely repressed domestic newspapers and radio stations, it was unsuccessful in banishing foreign journalists who conveyed graphic images of what it is like to live under a dictatorship.

Organized labor, long under the thumb of the regime, demonstrated a newfound militancy in the 1980s. Part of the pressure came from the rural sectors, supported by the church. Another source was the large growth in employment, beginning in the mid-1970s with the Itaipu project. White-collar workers in Asunción have begun to organize in recent years, but the labor movement remains relatively weak even today. University students are among the most outspoken critics of the regime, but constant police harassment has prevented their emergence as an effective pole for opposition to coalesce around. The business community has become more critical in recent years, but it has few levers of pressure, as the Colorado Party has effectively neutralized any efforts to change government policy.

Paraguay is still more rural than urban compared with most

of its neighbors, a fact which helps to explain the longevity of Stroessner's reign. The peasantry are apolitical, easily controlled and primarily concerned with protecting what little they have. It remains to be seen if church-sponsored organizational efforts will in time make a difference. Urban groups are small, poorly funded and organized, and highly susceptible to the suasions of the regime, which included incarceration, torture and exile. Indeed, perhaps as much as half of the population lives outside of Paraguay for economic or political reasons. The regime's practice in its early years of dropping its opponents alive from airplanes over the Chaco has apparently ended. But accusations of genocide against the country's dwindling Indian population, well founded in the 1970s, and the blatant abuse of basic civil liberties and human rights have continued unabated.

The most visible sign of organized opposition to the Stroessner regime was the formation of the National Accord in 1979. The Stroessner regime responded, albeit reluctantly, to pressure from U.S. Ambassador Robert White and the Carter Administration and permitted the formation of this authentic opposition movement. It is a loose coalition of the Febrerista, Authentic Radical Liberal, Christian Democratic parties and, until recently, MOPOCO. The accord put together a National Coordinating Committee for Free Elections in 1987, to mobilize popular support against Stroessner's candidacy in the 1988 presidential elections. This effort, although well intentioned, had little impact and Stroessner easily won. The major parties in the opposition were either barred from presenting candidates or decided to abstain from voting given their certain loss.

## VI

The first visible signs of a crack in the monolithic structure constructed by General Stroessner, his family and cronies occurred in August 1987 at the Colorado nominating convention called to endorse Stroessner for his eighth term in office. A public brawl broke out between the "militants" in the party, who were loyal to the general, and the "traditionalists," who wanted a clear separation of the party from the general. The traditionalists, noting that the party had preceded Stroessner, wanted steps to be taken to guarantee its future monopoly on power after his demise.

Thanks to quiet support from Stroessner, the militants got the upper hand. The traditionalists were not allowed to enter



the convention. The octogenarian president of the party, Juan Ramón Chávez, was dismissed and Interior Minister Sabino Montanaro emerged as party president and strongman of the regime. With Stroessner reelected and the militants' influence on the rise, the traditionalists began to examine their options. One that emerged in the course of 1988 was General Andrés Rodríguez, previously presumed to be completely loyal to Stroessner. Stroessner's son was married to Rodríguez' daughter. Rodríguez had been a captain in the 1954 insurrection that led to Stroessner's coming to power, and he had been openly favored and enriched by his close ties to the dictator.

Rumors circulated in 1988 that a palace "gang of four," said to include Interior Minister Montanaro and the president's personal secretary, were plotting to consolidate their personal position by using an ailing and visibly aging Stroessner as a shield. In rumor-driven Paraguay, the general's hospitalization in late 1988 set off a momentary panic that the 76-year-old general would die. The militants had heretofore supported the continuation of Stroessner's rule; now it appeared that they were planning to assume the reins of power should Stroessner die.

It emerged that the Stroessner clique suspected Rodríguez of plotting against the militants and the clique. Allegedly he was in contact with traditionalists such as Luis María Argaña, until recently president of the Supreme Court. Also, the marriage of Stroessner's son and Rodríguez' daughter had gone awry, weakening an important personal link between the two fathers. The key reason why Rodríguez was thought to have turned away from Stroessner was a rumor that the palace clique favored anointing another son of Stroessner, an air force colonel, as his successor. The army was not willing to accept an officer from another service, and Stroessner's son had an unsavory personal life that disqualified him in the eyes of the military. Many believed that Rodríguez wanted to serve as president himself before his active years were over. After all, he had served as a loyal subordinate for decades.

In January 1989 the palace clique undertook a major restructuring of the army, removing key commanders and undermining Rodríguez' support, leaving only Rodríguez himself in a significant position of troop command. Soon after he was reportedly told to accept appointment as defense minister or another administrative position or face retirement. Rodríguez and his traditionalist colleagues in the Colorado Party realized

they faced the real danger of being eliminated from the power balance. For the first time since the mid-1950s, the succession issue and the role of both party and army were topics of urgent consultation within the ruling family. Even though the Colorado Party was deeply fragmented, the succession debate remained within the party, divided as it was between the two warring camps. Throughout the plotting, there is no evidence that Stroessner was part of, or fully informed about, the deliberations under way. His recent illness and his apparent abdication of everyday decisions to the small group in the palace had removed him from effective control over the regime.

Rodríguez faced a dilemma: to accept his effective ouster or to move against the militants and the Stroessner clique. To lose command of the troops in his First Army Corps would effectively neutralize him as a military and a political arbiter. Removal from effective power would also result in a loss of control over the informal economy, a real sacrifice in personal terms and as a means of exercising authority.

But the alternative was extremely risky. To move against Stroessner raised the possibility of a split in the army (the most powerful branch of the military) and a possible uprising of the Colorado militants. In the worst scenario it could mean a repetition of the bloody civil war of the 1940s. Rodríguez had undoubtedly known this moment of decision would come sooner or later. Throwing caution to the wind, Rodríguez and his allies moved quickly on the night of February 2. Tanks from Rodríguez' First Army Corps base attacked the headquarters of the Presidential Escort Battalion in downtown Asunción, where a fierce battle was waged. The headquarters, where Stroessner took refuge once the coup began, was heavily shelled and his personal guard held out for hours against the superior forces of Rodríguez. While the official death toll was reported as 17, diplomatic observers estimate that closer to 200 people, mostly soldiers, died in the struggle. In the early morning hours of February 3, Stroessner surrendered and was arrested by the First Corps. Later that day Rodríguez was sworn in as Stroessner's replacement. The "gang of four" and other Colorado militants were arrested and replaced by leading figures of the traditionalist faction; Rodríguez subsequently purged the officer corps of potential adversaries.

Amid promises of democracy, a free press and a new respect for human rights, national elections were announced for May 1. Stroessner left quietly for exile in Brazil, a fitting end to his

career, given the economic and commercial rewards he had bestowed on Brazil during his last 20 years in office. Thanks to the aging general, Brazil had clearly outdistanced Argentina as the major force in southern cone politics and had been able peacefully to expand its economic and geopolitical influence well beyond its borders.

## VII

What now? In all likelihood, General Rodríguez will be elected as the Colorado Party's candidate for president in the May 1 elections. He will finish Stroessner's term, which ends in August 1993. Foreign Minister Argaña has announced that a constitutional amendment will probably be passed limiting the president to one term, with the right to reelection after one term out of office. Argaña has stated that he will support Rodríguez in 1989, so it will not be surprising if the general returns the favor and backs Argaña as the party's standard-bearer in 1993. The Colorados are also expected to retain a majority in the legislature.

Will the opposition participate in the elections? On February 13 the National Accord called for postponement of elections, threatening not to participate if they were held on May 1. It is a difficult decision. Not to participate will heighten tension in the country and increase international criticism, but it will probably not serve to undermine the regime in the short run. Failing to participate will leave the field entirely to the Colorados and will prevent the opposition from gaining some idea of its relative popularity. There are also obvious risks to entering the elections. Given the commanding position of the Colorados and the regime, opposition participation might serve only to legitimate the continued rule of the traditional military and civilian elites.

Domingo Laino, 53, is the leading candidate of the opposition and currently president of the National Accord. He protested against Stroessner since his years as a university student in the mid-1950s, and was arrested and tortured numerous times. The regime exiled him for nearly five years; he returned from Argentina in 1987. Even though he is the best known of Paraguay's opposition politicians, he is not necessarily acceptable to the other small parties in the accord as their principal leader. It is not only a lack of funds and, until the coup, severe limitations on civilian organizing that limit the immediate role of Laino and his colleagues. The opposition remains frag-

mented, with each small party harboring its own ambitions about the future and its role in a new Paraguay. Also, the opposition was weakened in February 1989 by the return of MOPOCO to the Colorado Party, ending a 30-year schism. While not unexpected, it indicates the fragility of the antidictatorial forces in Paraguay.

Will the accord provide the basis for the formation of an independent political party system in Paraguay? It is doubtful in the short run, given the personal and programmatic rivalries among the organizations. The parties need to be better funded and organized. After 35 years of Stroessner, it is not clear how deeply any of the parties have penetrated Paraguayan society. It remains to be seen, again, how much democracy the new regime will permit and how adept the parties are at mobilizing both new and old adherents.

The United States has a part to play. The role of recent American ambassadors dating back to Ambassador White has been highly salutary and should be continued; the United States should identify itself with the democratic process in Latin America and respect for human rights and the electoral process. Various U.S. political action organizations are supporting projects to train political party members as poll watchers. Civic education is needed to get out the vote, as Paraguayan citizens are not used to having their ballots count. Polling and survey research can play a crucial role in revealing public opinion and trends in voter preferences. International observation teams are needed to monitor the actual voting on election day. The United States has indicated an interest in supporting all of these efforts, and the Bush Administration should coordinate with similar initiatives from Western Europe and, one hopes, Latin America. At the margin the United States could hold out the possibility of restoring trade privileges under the generalized system of preferences if the rights of organized labor are recognized; it could also explore other limited economic and technical assistance in exchange for a more cooperative policy regarding drug smuggling.

Most important, the United States needs to work with other democratic states in the southern cone, to encourage their efforts to attract the new Paraguayan government to the norm of democratic politics. An important question is whether Brazil is interested only in stability or is willing to use its influence to work for stability in a democratic framework. If the government in Brasília takes a strong stand for democracy in Para-

guay, it will make a difference. If not, more of the same can be expected.

The Brazilian military will have a determining voice in framing national policy toward Paraguay in the immediate future. Its attitude will be influenced primarily by national security concerns. A matter of growing concern to the Brazilian armed forces is the shipment of drugs from Paraguay into Brazil, where national consumption is increasing. Traffickers' use of airfields in the interior threaten the army's control over national territory. Large amounts of drug money can easily corrupt the officer corps, and the laundering of drug income will have a destabilizing impact on the economy. As with all military establishments, the Brazilian one prefers predictability to uncertainty. General Rodríguez will no doubt try to convince his powerful neighbors that whatever political strategy he pursues will neither disturb the current balance of power in the heartland of South America nor create new internal security challenges in Paraguay or Brazil.

The network of international human rights organizations, which have called attention to the violation of basic liberties in Paraguay, need to continue their vigilance. They should monitor the promises of the Rodríguez regime to release all prisoners and restore the rule of law to Paraguay. The international press has a role to play in continuing to report both government and opposition activities. The Western European governments need to use whatever persuasive power they have with Rodríguez and the armed forces. Together with nongovernmental organizations, all can play an instrumental role in helping to maintain the political space that appeared after the coup and contribute to the careful expansion of the rules of the democratic game.

None of this will be easy. The political culture of Paraguay, the tradition of strong, authoritarian government and the absence of any democratic tradition are realities. The social and economic changes of the last 15 years need to be reflected in changes in the political system, against any effort to reconstitute the triad of the Colorado Party, armed forces and military strongman. There may not yet be a new Paraguay, but the old Stroessner model is inapplicable today and unlikely to be replicated for any significant period of time.

Change is under way in Paraguay and needs to be nurtured. But no one should expect great leaps forward lest they be used internally to justify a return to vigilance and a nationalist

reaction against intervention by outside forces. The changes to date—the formation of the National Accord, the restoration of a free press, the cautious pressure of the Roman Catholic Church and human rights groups—have not yet created a climate for a popular rejection of the regime. Still, the combined forces of the internal opposition, a questioning of the need for a continuation of dictatorial repression when Paraguay's neighbors are free, and the increase in international criticism have helped to generate a mood of limited expectation that things might change, ever so slightly for the better, with the general's fall from grace.