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"It is frequently asserted that political parties wear themselves out in power. In Paraguay . . . the reverse is happening."¹

Stroessner's Paraguay

BY JOHN HOYT WILLIAMS

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IN one of the least surprising "surprises" in Latin American political history, in early October, 1982, General of the Army Don Alfredo Stroessner announced that he would be the Colorado party candidate for the February, 1983, presidential elections. Should the 70-year-old General serve out the full 5-year term, he will have been President of Paraguay for an astounding 37 years: a record surpassed only by Constitutional Emperor Pedro II of Brazil (1845-1889).

What makes Stroessner's announcement noteworthy is that for months preceding it, strong rumor had it that he would not run again. According to this rumor, he was about to tap General Andrés Rodríguez, an old collaborator whom he had recently promoted from Commander of the potent First Cavalry Division (in direct command of troops) to Commander of the First Army Corps (a desk job). Following that promotion, Rodríguez several times substituted for the President at important ceremonies. In retrospect, it is probable that Stroessner was testing the water with the relatively charismatic Rodríguez and that the Colorado party and factions within the military pressed him to declare his own candidacy.

Stroessner is the current record holder among Latin American dictators, of whom John Gunther wrote in 1967 that "nothing much interests him except his work, at which he is indefatigable." He would probably be assured a victory in 1983 (as before) even in a totally free and fair election—authoritarianism swept into office by the electorate—a Paraguayan paradox.

Paraguay, independent since 1811, has a surface area of 157,000 square miles, of which 90,000 constitute the almost unpopulated Chaco, west of the Paraguay River. The population was estimated to be 2.9 million in 1980, plus some 600,000 living in neighboring countries, some in exile. Some 500,000 bilingual (Spanish-Guaraní) Paraguayans live in the capital, Asunción, but most of the population is rural. Only 1.3 percent of the soil is under cultivation, yet more than half Paraguay's labor force is engaged in farming. While the industrial sector is embryonic and the man-

ufacturing sector is poorly developed, smuggling has become a major source of national income. Brazilians have been seeping across the borders into northern and eastern Paraguay in large numbers, in part because of the immense binational construction project of the Itaipú hydroelectric complex, which will begin to go on stream in 1984. Itaipú and Corpus and Yaciretá (both built binationally with Argentina) will permit resource-poor Paraguay to export immense quantities of electric power in the future, which should generate a great deal of revenue. Classified as a military dictatorship, Paraguay maintains armed forces totaling less than 20,000 in three branches and an 8,000-man National Police with paramilitary capabilities. Both the armed forces and the National Police are involved in extensive civic action projects.

The history of Paraguay is the history of chaotic politics and recurrent military dictatorship. It is also the history of a nation cruelly ravaged by two major wars (the War of the Triple Alliance, 1864-1870, and the Chaco War, 1932-1935), which tended to glorify the army as the guarantor of national existence. (Stroessner, a young officer, was a combatant in the latter conflict.) Following the Chaco War, a bizarre catalogue of governments rose and fell through coup and counter-coup, and a sanguinary civil war was fought in the streets of Asunción and beyond in 1947. Stroessner, commander of the principal artillery regiment during the civil war, was largely responsible for the victory of the Colorado party which, lacking any other viable candidate, pushed him into the presidency in 1954.

From the beginning, political opposition to General Stroessner has stemmed from the other traditional party, the *Liberales*, and from the smaller *Febreristas*, Christian Democrats and Communists. Fortunately for the President, each of the institutional vehicles for opposition is internally fragmented and as a group the opposition has shown no aptitude or desire for cooperation. Most political parties have split leaderships, and the more radical among them are operating from exile. This is even true of the Colorado party itself, which developed a radical wing (MOPOCO), which is based in Argentina.

These bifurcated parties commonly expend more

¹Helene Grailot, "Paraguay," in Jean-Pierre Bernard, Silas Cerqueira, et al., *Guide to Political Parties of South America* (London, 1973), p. 385.

energy lambasting their own constituent parts than working against the regime. Even the minuscule Communist party (long outlawed) is divided bitterly into Moscow and anti-Moscow (Cuba and Beijing) segments. So deeply divided is the political ambient that *Latin America Regional Reports* could headline a September 10, 1982, article "Opposition Plans to Vote Stroessner." Fear of post-Stroessner political anarchy and of "military ambitions has led the opposition parties, paradoxically, to seek protection in the figure of the aging Stroessner."

The General rules Paraguay through the Colorado party, which profits from wide-ranging patronage, and the armed forces, of which he was and (as President) is commander in chief. The military is composed of a professional officer and noncom corps and conscript ranks. Officers and noncoms enjoy extensive perquisites, and even the lowliest two-year service private finds life better in uniform than on the farm. Typical of Stroessner, however, is his genius for defusing potential opposition which extends even to the armed forces; even if the army hierarchy were to grow weary of the President, "it would be no easy matter for the armed forces to carry out a revolt" against him.² For one thing, Stroessner personally deals out all promotions and transfers, from lowly lieutenant through chief of staff. A potential malcontent may find himself assigned to drainage ditch maintenance in the sweltering Chaco, or to an indefinite tour as a military attaché in Uganda. Perhaps more important insurance against military restiveness is Stroessner's personal Presidential Escort Battalion, a very heavily armed force of 1,500 select men screened for loyalty by the secret police. This unit, which controls almost as much firepower as the rest of the entire army, is essentially outside the control of the army and answerable only to the President. As if this were not enough protection, there is a similar Police Security Battalion of 400 picked men at the President's beck and call, plus some 100 plainclothes secret service men. These 2,000 men of what amounts to a praetorian guard are rarely, if ever, used in the field in counterinsurgency operations but are maintained in and near Asunción. Finally, yet another force is available to defend the President should the need arise. Something of a holdover from the 1947 civil war is the *py nandí*, or "barefoot ones," a Colorado party rural militia numbering perhaps 15,000. Having proved their worth in the civil war and in hunting down guerrillas in the 1950's and 1960's, the *py nandí* should be seen as a potential counterweight to the army itself.³

The Stroessner government, whose major officials

²Paul Lewis, *Paraguay Under Stroessner* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 227.

³It is sometimes written that the *py nandí* no longer exists, but in 1968 and 1973, the author witnessed its heavily armed parades in Asunción and in the interior.

were all personally selected, invests the office of the President with unusual powers, not the least of which are economic. In an average year, the executive branch controls and expends 75 percent of the national budget, while the legislative branch claims a paltry 1 percent.

Besides the military and the political factions, General Stroessner, "the Manager," has effectively "managed" all of Paraguay's other interest groups, albeit not without strain and rancor. The press (essentially an Asunción rather than a national institution) operates under certain restrictions, including occasional overt censorship, government withholding of newsprint, licensing difficulties and, for the obstreperous, closure. Almost every Asunción newspaper has been temporarily suspended several times for stepping on official toes. Roberto Thompson, editor of the influential *ABC Color*, was arrested in 1974 and was closely confined to an interior pueblo for three months for raising editorial questions that offended the government. *Comunidad*, a Catholic weekly harshly critical of the regime in the 1960's, was temporarily suspended twice, had all of its issues confiscated several times, and was permanently banned from publication in 1969. In that same decade, it was not unusual for an issue of *Time* magazine to be seized because of articles deemed abusive to the government. The book publishing trade is also closely monitored, so closely that certain authors, like historian Carlos Pastore and novelist Augusto Roa Bastos, must have their works published abroad. Some criticism, to be sure, is permitted, but only within carefully defined bounds.

Paraguay's fledgling union movement, representing perhaps 60,000 organized workers, is also under close government scrutiny. While the right to organize unions is guaranteed under the labor code, all new unions must apply to and be certified by the Department of Labor to be legal. As long as a union "behaves," it is allowed to exist, but unions can be legally dissolved for a variety of causes, such as the vague "engaging in activities other than those provided in the labor code." When Stroessner came to power, most (perhaps 90 percent) of organized labor belonged to the Paraguayan Confederation of Workers (CPT), a loose amalgam of trade unions loosely linked to the Colorado party and hence considered "safe." Despite the political ties of the CPT, however, in 1958 it declared a general strike over a variety of grievances. The strike failed; and instead of dissolving the organization, Stroessner dismissed its leadership and appointed a police officer as its chief. It is still under direct government control.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The Catholic Church, while never very strong in Paraguay, nevertheless constituted a potential focus for opposition to the "Stronato," as the Stroessner re-

gime is often known. Traditionally above politics, the Church is under presidential patronage; by special concordat its clergy is appointed and salaried by the state.

For the first 15 years of the Stroessner regime, the Church was largely quiescent under the Archbishop Anibal Mena Porta, perhaps because the regime was providing some stability, economic progress and vocal anti-communism. By the late 1960's, however, the Church began to champion human rights and social reform throughout Latin America, even in Paraguay, where a large proportion of the clergy is of foreign origin (many of these *regulares*, members of religious orders). With the growth of the Catholic University (founded in 1960) and an influx of foreign Jesuit professors, the Paraguayan Church had a forum and vehicle for reform and a dynamic team of spokesmen. Encouraged by the free discussion of ideas in the university, many parish priests in the poor barrios and in the interior and even the Auxiliary Bishop of Asunción, Anibal Maricevich, began to preach and demand social change. These activists and a growing Catholic Youth Organization began organizing workers and peasants, creating Christian Agrarian Leagues, publicizing what they called the "genocide" of the Paraguayan Indian and performing Peace-Corps-style labor in the villages. *Comunidad* became the clarion of the reform movement, and a Church radio station beamed the message to ubiquitous transistor radios throughout the land.

The Stroessner regime felt threatened; and after a string of student protests and demonstrations in 1968, it struck back. Twice, police invaded the Catholic University, damaging the buildings, beating students, and arresting professors, some of whom were deported or exiled. Shocked at this insult to his Church, the Archbishop slapped an interdict on Asunción and excommunicated the police chief and the Minister of the Interior. The regime only toughened its stand, closing *Comunidad*, smashing Catholic Youth rallies with billy clubs, outlawing the Catholic Relief Service and declining to appoint a successor when the Archbishop resigned in anger.

Weakened by new deportations, the Church was soon reeling, with its reformist tendencies drastically muted. After the 1974 discovery of a plot to assassinate the President, another wave of deportations, arrests and expulsions further neutralized the Church. The Stroessner regime had prevailed.

FOREIGN POLICY

Clearly, Don Alfredo has successfully reduced Paraguayan opposition to manageable proportions; at the same time, he has assiduously managed foreign affairs in Paraguay's favor—not an easy task for a landlocked nation sandwiched between two giant neighbors, Argentina and Brazil.

When Stroessner came to power in 1954, Brazil was

not the "Colossus of the South" it was soon to be, and Paraguay's chief trading partner was Argentina, a source of investment funds and culture. Twenty years later the situation had radically reversed itself; and Paraguay was rather in the orbit of the Portuguese-speaking superpower to its north.

Paraguay had long maintained trade and smuggling ties with both neighbors, but the same year the generals seized power in Brazil a good paved road was opened, linking Asunción with the Brazilian frontier at Presidente Stroessner/Foz do Iguassú. With this link to the east and privileged access to Brazilian ports, a new epoch began for Paraguay.

With massive aid from Brazil and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), a large hydroelectric dam was built on the Acaráí River near the Brazilian border. Since its opening in 1968, Paraguay has had such a surfeit of electric power that it has been selling a large share to both Brazil and Argentina. In 1973, Brasília and Asunción agreed to joint construction of the huge Itaipú hydroelectric station on the border, based on the world's most powerful waterfall, Guairá (or, as it is known in Brazil, Sete Quedas). Brazil came up with the lion's share of the estimated \$11-billion financing, and Paraguay will repay its neighbor with the major portion of its "share" of the power generated. When Itaipú begins to come on stream in 1983, Paraguay will begin selling the rest of its share of energy on the open market; it needs little for use at home.

Itaipú generated a boom in Paraguay that is just beginning to decelerate. Construction in the general region of the dam and in Asunción and spiraling land values throughout the country created new fortunes, almost full employment, and a great influx of foreign investment. It also caused the "Brazilianization" of Paraguay, which upset many nationalists and jealous Argentina as well. The Brazilian "presence" in Paraguay became almost overbearing; a host of Brazilian companies, ranging from the influential Banco do Brasil to a company which cans hearts of palm, expanded or moved into Paraguay, along with increasing Brazilian aid, development loans, and other assistance.

In 1982 alone, Brazil agreed to finance and provide technical assistance for Paraguay's first steel plant (at Villa Hayes), a major, ultra-modern fertilizer plant, an alcohol-fuel program, and the creation of a series of agribusiness centers for soya-crushing, pulp production and cotton spinning. In return, Brazilian com-

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areas, some political dialogue has begun in urban sectors. Indian representatives have been seated in the Council of State, and moderate political factions are functioning with relative freedom. Thus far, right-wing attempts to overthrow the Rios Montt government have failed, and some of those involved have been arrested or gone into hiding. For the moment, at least, the possibility of a modification of the political system exists.

Even the Honduran-Nicaraguan border seems slightly less tense. The threat of a regional war, while still alive, has receded and efforts at dialogue have resumed. And in Honduras and Costa Rica, moderate, elected civilian governments hold power despite growing pressures.

On the economic scene, the lowering of interest rates offers some slight relief, and commodity prices may at last have hit rock bottom, although no significant recovery is yet in sight. Venezuela and Mexico continue to supply petroleum on concessionary terms to the region, and United States financial assistance, especially that provided through the Caribbean Basin Initiative (while not touching any of the fundamental problems of the area), should help stave off short-term financial collapse.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Central American political and economic crisis may finally have reached its nadir, although prospects for real recovery are still far distant. The situation was summed up by Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge in a May, 1982, speech to the Central American Conference on Commerce and Development. He noted that the economic crisis constituted "a war for the survival of our nations," and added:

The political crisis that afflicts our region has internal roots, of old injustices and lost hopes, which are jumbled together with the intervention of foreign interests. There will be no peace in Central America and the Caribbean while the infernal game of hegemonic interests continues in our region. In the cruel conflicts of our peoples the Central Americans provide the bodies and others gather the advantages.¹³

But President Monge also saw in the crisis an opportunity for Central Americans to reshape their lifestyles, their forms of production and their international economic relationships. Above all, he saw the situation as creating an imperative for united action by Central American governments to resolve their own problems, free of outside domination. The events of 1983 will go far toward determining whether Monge's hopes will have any substance or whether the war for the survival of the Central American nations will be lost. ■

¹³Speech by President Luis Alberto Monge to the Central American Conference on Commerce and Development, Panama, May 14, 1982.

STROESSNER'S PARAGUAY

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panies operating in Paraguay were granted very substantial, long-term tax breaks. Many Paraguayan entrepreneurs complain bitterly that their nation is becoming a virtual colony of Brazil. Adding to anti-Brazilian sentiment is the continuing tide of Brazilian immigrants and speculators who thickly populate most of the northern and eastern border areas. In these regions, the Portuguese language and the Brazilian cruzeiro dominate.

Profiting from Argentina's jealous reaction, Stroessner has been able to drive a hard bargain with Buenos Aires on the issue of two major binational power stations on the Alto Paraná, Corpus and Yací-Retá rivers. Argentina needs the energy and Paraguay does not, and the projects were bogged down for years until Argentina sweetened the pot sufficiently for Paraguay. Severe economic problems have forced continual delays in Argentina, but whenever Yací-Retá (2.7 million KW) comes on stream, Paraguay will be the gainer.

Stroessner benefits not only from the rivalry between his neighbors, but also from the fact that both nations (and Bolivia as well) want to maintain him in power. Those military governments cooperate fully with Asunción on matters of intelligence and defense, for they vastly prefer the General to a chaotic or left-wing leader who might well attract their own dissidents and provide a springboard for subversion. Stroessner provides Brasilia, Buenos Aires and La Paz with an ideologically compatible frontier.

THE ECONOMY

Economically, Paraguay had made considerable progress under Stroessner, although a disproportionate share of the fruits of prosperity has poured into the pockets of the influential, many of whom are foreign. Nonetheless, the business community, which has lauded and profited from the stability of the Stroessner regime, is beginning to have reservations. There is worry about massive Brazilian influence and economic dominance, and now that the Itaipú boom years are all but over, the economy is showing serious signs of strain. For the first time, Paraguay is running serious trade deficits and its national debt is increasing dramatically. The guaraní (G, the monetary unit), stable for 20 years, is tumbling rapidly, and while the government attempts to maintain it by enforcing the official exchange rate of 126 to the dollar in most trade intercourse, it takes at least G200 to purchase a dollar on the streets.

With its currency artificially maintained, Paraguay's trade is seriously and negatively affected. Smuggling, long a major economic activity, has reached a dramatic level. It is estimated that legal, registered trade exports to Brazil in 1981 amounted to \$296 million, while the volume of smuggling was at least \$457 million. On this

“invisible commerce” alone, the government was cheated out of at least \$70 million in export taxes. This has forced the government to begin to crack down on smuggling, an activity it had once winked at and even fostered, and the crackdown is angering many an “exporter.” And while businessmen are feeling the pinch and the smugglers are worrying, increased government taxation has the entire middle class screaming, and falling prices for cotton are directly threatening the economic existence of 100,000 peasant families.

President Stroessner, who was born at tiny Encarnación on the Argentine border, son of a German immigrant brewer and a Paraguayan mother, will again run for the presidency in February, 1983. He will run against the Radical Liberal party's Enzo Doldán, and he will win perhaps 72 percent of the vote. Most probably, he will weather the economic storm and some related unrest, because according to the constitution of 1967—basically his own handiwork—he has immense powers. He will use these powers when he must, and despite the 79-article bill of rights, he will no doubt continue the state of siege, which effectively annuls all rights. For “system redundancy” he can rely on the 1955 “Law for the Defense of Democracy,” which permits the executive to dispense with normal constitutional guarantees in the face of a threat of subversion. Yet Stroessner, the “Manager,” a tireless worker and a shrewd politician, would prefer the velvet glove. Never an ideologue, the General actually seeks—insofar that it is possible in fractious Paraguay—national consensus and unity. More than any Paraguayan leader since Carlos Antonio López (1842-1862), he has achieved this. Commander in Chief, head of the Colorado party, patron of the Church and President, Stroessner would prefer to use his vast power of patronage and other mechanics of peaceful persuasion. He will, however, respond to perceived threat harshly: arrests, deportation, exile, Chaco work camps and disappearance for serious dissidents, and the bullet for guerrillas. ■

COLOMBIA: OLD PROBLEMS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

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seized thousands of people with leftist sympathies for questioning following the arms robbery, and incidents of torture, mysterious deaths and disappearances increased. The military recovered most of the stolen arms and broke up a large number of urban guerrilla cells. In February, 1980, the M-19 took over the Embassy of the Dominican Republic with 14 ambassadors (including the United States Ambassador) as hostages. The peaceful resolution of that crisis—the release of the hostages in return for safe-conduct out of the

⁴Gabriel García Márquez apparently intends to return to Colombia in March, 1983, to found a newspaper with his Nobel Prize money.

country for the guerrillas, an undisclosed sum of money raised by private channels and the promise to permit human rights groups greater access to military trials—revealed the weakness of the guerrilla threat and the ability of Colombian leaders to deal with serious crises.

The guerrillas never gained broad public support. Significantly, though, the deteriorating human rights situation was condemned by prominent members of both traditional parties in association with members of other parties and movements. Their voices were reinforced by a critical report presented to the government by Amnesty International. Of growing concern were abuses in remote areas of the country, in areas of long-standing FARC guerrilla activity as well as in Caquetá and nearby areas, where the M-19 was active. A new paramilitary organization, Death to Kidnappers (MAS—*Muerte a Secuestradores*), also began to kill political prisoners in their jail cells.

The government responded to political pressure by enacting a largely unsuccessful limited amnesty in March, 1981. By late 1981, with most of its leadership dead or in jail, it was clear that the M-19 was no longer a military threat. Turbay appointed an ad-hoc “peace commission” with Carlos Lleras as its head to seek a successful amnesty agreement with the guerrillas. The work of the peace commission met opposition from the military and from Conservatives and became embroiled in electoral politics. Turbay was worried that the commission's success might hurt López's campaign, since the candidate was arguing that with a firm mandate he would bring “peace” to the country. Frustrated, the commission members resigned two weeks before the presidential elections. A week after Belisario's surprise victory, Turbay announced the lifting of the state of siege, thus automatically repealing the statute on security. By that move, Turbay preempted the new President and complicated the process of negotiating a new amnesty, which would have to go through Congress instead of being enacted by executive decree.

From his first days in office, President Betancur has sought an atmosphere of national reconciliation. He has repeatedly invited Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature, to return to the country.⁴ The famous left-wing author had fled the country in March, 1981, fearing that his connections with Cuba could lead to his arrest. The President promised to investigate MAS and other right-wing organizations and to prevent human rights abuses. And in spite of initial opposition from some Conservative leaders, he has proceeded vigorously to formulate unconditional political amnesty. High government officials have met openly with guerrilla leaders; the major factions in both parties support the measures. However, the military worries that the amnesty does not provide for disarming the guerrillas and that some