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The Metamorphosis of the Paraguayan Right

After more than half a century of nearly uninterrupted Colorado Party rule, gains by an extremist candidate from the fringes show signs that the power of traditional parties could be eroding.

There is a folk story that can still be heard today about how dictator Alfredo Stroessner—who ruled with an iron fist from 1954 to 1989—could change the official temperature of hot and tropical Paraguay. The story isn't true, of

course, but as with all mythology, it doesn't matter. The story represents the omnipotent image that the most important political figure of the 20th-century Paraguayan right still holds and on the basis of which most representations of the Colorado Party,



Paraguayan flags fly in the streets of Asunción, Paraguay on President Mario Abdo Benítez's inauguration day, August 15, 2018.
(TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE / CC BY 2.0 DEED)

the country's dominant party, have been maintained. Stroessner's image has been resignified, attached to other men in the nation's history who have concentrated political power—although none of them quite like the dictator himself, who remained head of state longer than any other Latin American general.

But it is not only the pro-Colorado or nationalist representations of Stroessner that endure in Paraguay. So do the political parties themselves, having survived the critical vicissitudes of history. Indeed, one of the central characteristics of the Paraguayan political system has been the presence of two parties—Liberal and Colorado—in organizing political life, even in periods of instability and authoritarianism. The two-party system, which began in 1887 in the wake of the liberal postwar 1870 Constitution, has endured to the present and remains the central actor in public life. Looking back at the last half century, these parties contributed to the legitimacy of the Stroessner dictatorship, the transition to democracy, the 2012 “parliamentary” coup against Fernando Lugo, and the rise of the “new business-led right” with Horacio Cartes as president from 2013 to 2018.

While Lugo's ouster ended a challenge to the established system from the left, the latest challenge to the system comes from the right. In the April 2023 presidential election, a new disruptive political actor appeared. Paraguayo “Payo” Cubas won 23 percent of the votes with a third political force called the National Crusade Party (PCN). This Paraguayan incarnation of Javier Milei exhibits, as in other parts of the region and the world, what the political scientist Cas Mudde has called the “fourth wave,” the 21st-century phenomenon of the normalization or demarginalization of the extreme right. According to Mudde, this global far-right fourth wave began with three overlapping crises: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (and other subsequent ones), the great recession of 2008, and the “refugee crisis” of 2015.

In the Latin American context, we could add an additional overlapping crisis related to the progressive and populist governments that emerged at the

turn of the 21st century in response to the crisis of neoliberalism. Indeed, 2008 showed that the Pink Tide governments did not resolve the dependency of Latin American economies on extractive industries and debt, which further discredited the leading cadres of traditional politics. It is through this historical context that we must understand the rise of new right wings in Paraguay and Latin America.

The Democratic Pact: From One Coup to Another

Paraguay began its current democratic cycle with Stroessner's overthrow, carried out by a faction of the Colorado Party and the Armed Forces on February 2 and 3, 1989. The departure of Stroessner, however, did not mean the departure of his Colorado Party, also known as the National Republican Association (ANR), from the leadership of the state or government. As such, the ANR was the party of both the dictatorship and of the transition to democracy. The party won all the elections until 2008, when Lugo triumphed. Of the eight presidential elections held since the return to democracy, seven handed power to the ANR, a record among Latin American political parties.

In 1992, a few years after the transition to democracy a new constitution was introduced. The charter was forged out of a democratic pact by way of a constituent assembly involving the various political forces, including some that had returned from exile. Under the shadow of a 35-year authoritarian dictatorship, the new constitution granted greater weight to the legislative branch at the expense of the executive and created a series of new institutions that set the stage for a new system of competition and cooperation between the parties. Even so, the transition period was tumultuous, marked by three military rebellions in 1996, 1999, and 2000, and the assassination of a vice president in 1999.

In the 1992 Constitution, political elites agreed on a *pacto mordaza*—roughly, a restraining agreement—stipulating there could be no presidential reelection and that presidents could serve only one

five-year term. This has functioned, along with the creation of Congress's power of impeachment (used against Lugo in 2012) and the replacement of the state of siege with the state of exception, as the core of the 1989 democratic pact. In addition to helping to shape the party system, the one-term limit has been a central rule for party competition. Starting in the 1990s, the political opposition became a key force in Congress and the judiciary, and this game of inter- and intra-party collaboration has ensured democratic stability and the permanence of political structures.



President Fernando Lugo, accompanied by Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez, marks Paraguay's Independence Day in Asunción, May 14, 2009. (JUAN ALBERTO PÉREZ DOLDÁN / CC BY 2.0 DEED)

Lugo entered office as president in 2008 under the banner of the Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC), a set of center-left parties and social movements that reflected the wave of progressive governments sweeping the region. But Lugo's candidacy also reflected profound internal changes within Paraguayan society, noted in the trend of declining popularity of presidential candidates since at least 2003. Lugo, the first non-Colorado president of the democratic era, took power without a coup d'état. His program was reformist: "Hunger has no ideology," his campaign repeated. He was "the candidate of consensus," self-described ideologically as "right

in the middle, like the opening of a poncho." He spoke of unity, with the focus—as was the case at many times in history—on eradicating the Colorado Party from government and making progress on land distribution and state policies that would encourage the wealth distribution. "I listened to the people and to God," he said of his candidacy after leading a multi-sector march of 40,000 people under the slogan "Paraguay is fed up."

Unsurprisingly perhaps, with such a message Lugo's rise to the presidency called into question the political system's formal and informal rules of operation. Without sufficient representation in the legislative body, the new president was left with little ability to carry out his reforms and without political protection. A system in which national destinies are defined more by elite games than by civil society actors left him with no options: Lugo was removed from office through an impeachment process that lasted just 48 hours.

Strictly speaking, the traditional elites, having been displaced from power, used institutional spaces, particularly the legislative and judicial branches, to pursue their political strategy. In this way, they developed various mechanisms, among which this new device for removing presidents—the so-called legislative coup—stands out. Such tactics were the basis for the neo-coups carried out in Brazil with the dismissal of Dilma Rousseff and recently in Peru with lawmakers' repeated attempts to remove presidents through impeachment. The right thus uses mechanisms of the republican system itself to overthrow democratically elected governments without causing the breakdown of the political regime or the constitutional rule of law.

Horacio Cartes and the Neoliberal Business-Led Right

The crisis of the Colorado Party that brought Lugo to the presidency, and the institutional crisis produced by his ouster, help explain the emergence of the multimillionaire businessman Horacio Cartes as president, in office from 2013 to 2018. This

series of events also helps explain how Cartes, now the undisputed president of the Colorado Party, imposed Santiago Peña as his handpicked candidate in the 2023 presidential elections.

In crisis after Lugo's rise to power, the Colorado Party was "saved" by Cartes, whose claim to legitimacy was that he had never participated in politics. His "post-ideological" stance activated imaginaries that had mobilizing effects for an electorate composed of contradictory social and ideological strata. Cartes's lack of background in bureaucratic structures combined with his own personal fortune enabled him to avoid establishing solid commitments with anyone.

Recent research has shown how the presence of business figures in right-wing governments has led to economic programs that deepen unequal social orders. Indeed, once in power, these business-led right-wing forces impose neoliberal programs and mechanisms that enable the business class to appropriate surplus, especially through indebtedness, privatization, and financial valuation. At the same time, these right-wing governments disable channels of progressive income distribution like tax regimes, pension systems, and the like. In the case of Paraguay, the strength of the Colorado and Liberal parties—that is, of the traditional political class—did not allow Cartes to impose a cabinet of business figures. However, he formed a group of informal economic advisors to guide him in that area.

During the Cartes era, conservative religious groups became organizers of cultural reaction and mobilization against so-called "gender ideology." In the realm of state security, the 2013 reform of the National Defense and Internal Security Law gave the president the power to use the Armed Forces in internal conflicts, without needing to request authorization from Congress. On the economic front, the Public-Private Partnership Law was approved in 2013, and several new varieties of genetically modified seeds were approved for cultivation—mostly corn, as well as soy—belonging to transnational



Paraguayan President Santiago Peña meets with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, September 20, 2023. (PALÁCIO DO PLANALTO / CC BY-ND 2.0 DEED)

agrochemical companies like Monsanto, Syngenta, and others.

Like other presidents of the democratic era, including Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) and Lugo (2008-2012), Cartes attempted to gain the right to presidential reelection by way of a constitutional amendment. The move did not achieve legislative support and actually articulated official and opposition forces, dividing lawmakers into two multi-party poles, each made up of traditional parties and leftist forces. The attempt unleashed an institutional crisis and led to the burning of Congress and the death of one protester in 2017. The upheaval only ended with the intervention of the Catholic Church, which put an end to the president's reelection bid. The crisis led to Cartes losing his internal party support and opened the way for a Colorado Party rival, Mario Abdo Benítez, who served as president from 2018 to 2023.

In the context of the pandemic, characterized in Paraguay by poor government management and numerous complaints of state corruption, social mobilizations and various conflicts emerged

demanding President Abdo Benítez’s resignation. The delay in receiving vaccines and suspicions of over-invoicing in the government’s acquisition of health supplies reaffirmed a latent antagonism pitting the traditional “political class” against the “citizens.” From mobilized citizens’ demand for political reform, an electoral innovation emerged. Law 6318/2019, approved in 2019, created a new voting system that maintained party-list proportional representation—meaning that parties gain seats according to the number of votes they get for a set list of candidates—while allowing a voter to choose a preferred candidate from the list. The reform enabled more parties and coalitions to participate, giving it a somewhat democratizing feel. But by splintering the opposition parties, it actually reinforced the Colorado Party’s power, as Sara Mabel Villalba explained



President Horacio Cartes meets with his Taiwanese counterpart, July 2017. (TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE / CC BY 2.0 DEED)

in a 2021 article in *Nueva Sociedad*.

Despite President Abdo Benítez’s weak government and low approval ratings, the Colorado Party, with Cartes’s preferred candidate Peña running for president, took the top office again in 2023. The electoral victory, however, was not just the handiwork of

the Colorado Party and its leading cadres, but also of the unintended consequences of direct intervention by the U.S. government, which had accused Cartes of “rampant corruption that undermines democratic institutions.” The U.S. State Department and Treasury first prohibited him from entering the United States and, later, from accessing banks and doing business with North American companies. The measure impacted the former president’s businesses, leading him to have to dissolve his economic group and hand over the reorganized holdings to his children and other figureheads. In addition to the corruption, Washington accused Cartes of having links with the militant group Hezbollah, which the United States considers a terrorist organization. Yet far from having a negative political impact, this foreign intervention served to reinforce the Colorado Party’s nationalist identity, reactivating a core element in its political and ideological history: the appeal to national sovereignty.

Peña, formerly a member of the Liberal Party, had been the finance minister in the Cartes government. In 2016 Cartes announced that all of the cabinet ministers who were not of the Colorado Party would be replaced. There’s an anecdote that Peña was hanging out wearing shorts and drinking *tereré* (Paraguayan tea beverage) at the club with his family on a Sunday when Cartes called him urgently. His brother lent Peña some pants and he rushed to the meeting. When he arrived, Cartes, then president, forced Peña to join the Colorado Party and draped the party’s iconic red scarf around his neck. A photo of the moment made the rounds on social media, earning Peña the label “Cartes’s peon.” From then on, Peña, alongside his mentor Cartes, would seal his new career with the Colorado Party.

Before his post as finance minister, Peña worked for the Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. After his party conversion—and his eventual departure from Cartes’s cabinet—he served on the Board of Directors of Banco Basa, part of Cartes’s holding group. Since aspiring to be president, Peña has worked to erase his brand of origin. He stopped

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being a liberal technocrat, performing well as a Colorado Party member and showing himself to be a good politician for the stage. This was necessary as U.S. scrutiny forced Cartes to leave the political scene.

Cartes to Cubas: From Neoliberal to Radical Right

The 2023 elections were marked by two other significant outcomes. On the one hand, the vote led to the extinction of the parliamentary left: the Guasú Front, the leftist coalition led by former president Lugo, lost five of its six seats in the Senate, including Lugo's. On the other hand, the elections saw the emergence of a new political actor: Paraguayo "Payo" Cubas.

Cubas is the new thing in politics on the right, like Milei and Nayib Bukele. He is the perfect synthesis: he hates the political class and the institutions of democracy with a nationalism dressed in fascist black. Without a party structure and with a self-managed campaign, he represented change for an important portion of voters who were living

through post-pandemic social discontent but also with the death of democracy, to paraphrase Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. Lacking money for his campaign, social media were Cubas's main allies.

Cubas does not dress in fashionable clothes, he does not have advisors nor hairdressers, and he does not live in one of the richest areas of the city. He is the son of a military man and always dresses in black. He was elected as senator in 2018 but was removed from his post the following year after assaulting a police officer and calling for the death of Brazilians living in Paraguay, among other infamous stunts. He then made a show of selling hamburgers on the street to survive, a move that went viral and generated great public support. He later sold hamburgers again to finance his campaign. He's a self-made man. With a cell phone in his hand, he takes photos with ordinary citizens and recounts from memory the prices of each cut of meat. Everything Cubas does reflects austerity and precariousness in the face of the "traditional politicians," who speak from the dining rooms of their luxurious homes. Cubas is the only candidate who spoke Guaraní in each of his interventions.

Cubas's National Crusade Party ended up reflecting the will of a social sector that has grown in step with the deterioration of incomes and well-being. This sector also views the current forms of democracy with increasing distrust. This phenomenon is, in some sense, the result of the loss of a common horizon and vision for possible collective well-being, of a broken basic consensus, and of the unmet promises of liberal democracies. Faced with this impotence, political activists have emerged who know how to read this discomfort and transfigure it into electoral potential with uncertain results. Because the right, as Pablo Stefanoni says, presents itself with rebellious models, like Cubas, who gains popularity by attacking the Colorado machine, while the left and its derivatives stand stunned in the face of the



Payo Cubas (CÁMARA DE SENADORES)

decomposition of a state that no longer knows how to offer some promise of welfare.

For Cubas, like Milei, the structural conditions of the pandemic, foreign debt, the role of unions and social movements, are all ignored. In the face of pessimistic impossibilism, in the face of what Lucas Rubinich calls “*homo resignatus*,” flooding our common sense, Cubas and Milei both show that one can make and transform a reality that appears to be designed by a focus group and its coach. With a discourse challenging democratic institutions—of which he was a part as a senator—and with the slogan “the belt will be the symbol of the revolution,” Cubas called to reform the constitution, give greater power to the executive, and establish a unicameral legislature. This rhetoric connects the rejection of democratic institutions with the denunciation of politicians’ privileges, the defense of a tax on soybeans, the call for a better classification of large estates for taxation purposes, and the denunciation of the “ecological disaster caused by livestock farming” and the “unlimited advance of soybean production.”

Despite this social and ecological nod, Cubas opposes abortion and marriage equality and has no qualms about asking for the use of security forces, the death penalty, and the closure of Congress. But it’s more than that. He performs economic sensitivity for those who do not see a future, for all those for whom the post-pandemic capitalist order plays dirty tricks. He does not speak with business figures, nor does he have allied channels that transmit his speeches. He also has no political agenda for the economic elite.

In the 2023 elections, Cubas and his National Crusade Party displaced the parliamentary left of the Guasú Front, thereby obtaining the first minority in the Senate. The left, which until recently was in government, has been virtually erased from the map. Cubas, “the people’s candidate,” managed to interpellate sectors of Paraguayan society and reduced the leading role of the traditional Colorado and Liberal parties, as well as other recently formed political alliances.

As in other parts of the world and Latin America, the main characteristics of the emergence of these radical right expressions are the fragmentation of the conventional right and the appearance of new leaders and formations that until recently were marginal in the region. These actors have challenged the established party system and have in some cases obtained good electoral results. Cubas’s populist performance is based on two elements: rhetoric with a strong anti-state bias and a rejection of political elites as being responsible for the country’s problems. Politicians and the state are merged into one. The silent counterrevolution, as described by Piero Ignazi, replaces social values accepted as part of a life in common, with a post-materialist agenda that questions issues such as the rights of minorities, women, and sexual dissidents. This transformation takes up the fight against political correctness, against what is established and taken as given.

Having been jailed for a few months on various charges of disturbing the peace after the 2023 elections, Cubas, now free, says he will continue selling hamburgers and plans to run again in 2028. In November, when Milei was elected president of Argentina, Cubas uploaded a photo on social media in which he appeared alongside Milei and Bukele. The photo was faked, but it doesn’t matter. As with the long-lasting myth about Stroessner controlling the temperature, we will have to wait and see how the impacts and the myths of the new radical right will endure. ■

Translated from Spanish by NACLA.

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