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HUMAN RIGHTS/DEMOCRACY

What about Paraguay?

By Frank O. Mora / September 11, 2015

Why are people not paying attention to Paraguay? The landlocked, Southern Cone country is experiencing the same, if not worse, corruption scandals, social protests, approaching economic stagnation, and rising levels of violence widely reported on as just about every country of Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, the only time that Paraguay made recent national news in the United States was when Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee backed the Paraguayan government's decision to deny an abortion to a ten-year old girl allegedly raped by her stepfather.

Paraguay's size and location, sandwiched between two regional powers that have historically sought to exercise influence over Paraguay's domestic and foreign policy, and its self-imposed isolation since the 19th century, have made it difficult for the Guarani nation to attract much attention, even from academics, journalists and analysts that focus on the region.

But the dark horse of the region provides another example of the strains facing democracy in Latin America, with one unique twist: a growing armed rebel movement. All of this should merit more analysis and attention, both of Paraguay independently and comparatively.

The collapse of the 35-year regime of General Alfredo Stroessner in 1989 triggered a raft of research on the politics, economics and foreign policy implications of the democratic transition in Paraguay. The social science attention—by local, regional and U.S. scholars—was particularly fitting since the Stroessner regime had viewed social science as subversive. It was also short-lived. A decade later, research and writing on Paraguay outside the country was reduced to a trickle, with the exception of history, literature and anthropology, areas where Paraguayan studies was strong prior to 1989.

At the same time that political scientists tend to focus on other countries, U.S. and foreign journalists that work on Latin America don't pay much attention to Paraguay either. Sure, there are the rare moments like when an important figure like Pope Francis visits the country or the rape and abortion scandal mentioned earlier. As a result, even readers of those stories would likely struggle to find Paraguay on a map. (Hint: it's between Brazil and Argentina.)

Yet, there are very immediate and unique news stories unfolding in the country that affect not only Paraguayans but also its neighbors. One of the most urgent is the growing security challenge presented by the Paraguayan Peoples' Army (EPP)—one of four guerrilla groups in the hemisphere. (Two are in Colombia and supposedly negotiating a peace agreement with the government and the other is the *Sendero*

Luminoso in Peru.) In recent years, the EPP has been responsible for an upsurge in the number of kidnappings, attacks on Paraguayan security forces (three soldiers and thirteen police have been killed since 2008) and, just last month, the alleged bombing of an electricity pylon in northern Paraguay leaving over 700,000 without power. There is also evidence the EPP received training assistance from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) and is cooperating with Brazilian and Paraguayan drug trafficking organizations.

Beyond the armed threats to Paraguayan civilians (and their electricity) and the EPP's nefarious regional connections, Paraguay's democracy is finding itself under siege. Ever since its transition, the government has suffered from deep institutional weakness, corruption and low trust in political institutions and leaders, which has only worsened in recent years. Since 1989 there have been two constitutional crises—1996 and 2012—that nearly derailed democratic rule. In the end, democracy survived, but not without international rejection of the events surrounding the crises and deepening popular cynicism.

As a result, the level of satisfaction with democratic performance is among the lowest in the region, according to Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer. Low levels of popular esteem stem in large part from corruption. Paraguay scores among the top 15 percent of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to Transparency International. The country's endemic corruption is not lost on its citizens. According to AmericasBarometer, 78 percent of Paraguayans believe corruption is somewhat or largely pervasive, the highest in the region.

Like their counterparts in Guatemala and Brazil, Paraguayans, though often known for their fatalism regarding corruption, are no longer sitting idly by. Public outcry in the last month has led to the resignation of Comptroller General Oscar Ruben Velasquez and National Police Commander Francisco Alvarenga for separate corruption scandals. The former, nearly impeached, resigned after being accused of fraud and illicit enrichment, while Alvarenga left his post after allegations that he embezzled fuel allocated to the National Police.

Today, President Horacio Cartes is facing strong opposition from multiple corners, including from within his own ruling Colorado Party that see him as an interloper (stalwarts within the party view his late 2009 membership with suspicion) and believe he is quietly planning to lift the constitutional ban on re-election. Despite strong economic growth (14 percent in 2013 and 4 percent in 2014) and progress instituting structural reforms, Cartes is confronted over a series of controversies associated with his standing within the Colorado party and a growing social protests and labor strikes. According to a poll by Ibope, conducted in Asuncion and the surrounding Central Department, the Cartes government has a favorability rating of 34 percent. Political uncertainty and those anti-government protests are likely to intensify if Cartes follows through with the rumored constitutional amendment extending his term while trying to manage economic contraction this year.

If you follow the region, much of this likely sounds familiar for almost any other country, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, Chile... just to name a few. Unfortunately, Paraguay has yet to get the attention it deserves. That's a shame, not just for the scholarly comparative

lessons that could be drawn from Paraguay's political and governance crisis relative to other countries, but also for policy. Institutional breakdown and crises can sometimes be headed off through public attention over politicians' efforts to seize power or the breakdown of social norms and the state. Too often in Paraguay—such as in 1996 and 2012—the threats to the democratic order were percolating under the surface months before they erupted. When they did, world attention briefly focused on the country and then moved on. Hopefully this time, scholars, journalists and policymakers will pay attention before the breakdown—not just for Paraguay, but for the region and its neighbors in particular.

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