

# Coup threat in Paraguay

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Paraguay appears to be on the brink of another military coup as the government, the courts and the ruling Colorado Party continue a bitter struggle over the preparations for May 10 presidential elections.

The leading contender in the presidential contest is Lino Cesar Oviedo, who is running for office from a military prison in the capital of Asuncion. Oviedo, a former army general, was one of the principal figures in the military coup that brought down the 35-year-old dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner in 1989.

Two years ago he led another military uprising, this time against the current government of President Juan Carlos Wasmosy. Oviedo carried out the coup attempt after Wasmosy sought to dismiss him as army commander.

The coup, which sent Wasmosy running for cover at the United States Embassy, sparked mass demonstrations in the capital against a return to dictatorship. Oviedo has been detained since last December and was sentenced last month by a military tribunal to 10 years in jail.

Since the 1996 coup attempt, Wasmosy and Oviedo have been public political enemies. Nevertheless, over the bitter opposition of Wasmosy and the rest of the party leadership, the membership of the Colorado Party selected the military strongman as Colorado's presidential candidate.

Oviedo has run a right-wing populist campaign, pledging to move his government to the countryside, execute criminals and withhold payments on Paraguay's foreign debt. The ruling party has attempted to name a new candidate, but may be unable to place him on the ballot. Oviedo's fate rests in the hands of the Supreme Court, which is hearing an appeal of his sentence. If it is denied, then he will be unable to run.

Leaders of the Colorado Party have in recent days issued increasingly open appeals for the armed forces to

intervene. At a political rally in Asuncion on April 4, Wasmosy declared he would personally lead the "Colorado hordes" in an attack on the Superior Court of Electoral Justice, in retaliation for the panel's alleged prejudice against the ruling party. Other party leaders declared that they would mobilize supporters to stop the elections by turning voters away from the polls.

The party's vice-presidential candidate, Nicanor Duarte Frutos, denounced what he termed "a tyranny of the judiciary" and called on the armed forces to "come and impose order."

Domingo Laino, the candidate of the opposition Democratic Alliance, called on the population to ignore Wasmosy's "incitement to violence" and expressed his confidence in the "dignity" of the Paraguayan armed forces.

Leading opposition legislator Euclides Acevedo, however, said that a military coup appears imminent. The only question was whether it would come before or after the Supreme Court's ruling on Oviedo. "The struggle is apparently being waged by those who want to block Oviedo's access to power or to the candidacy," he said. The legislator claimed to have definite information that the military planned to seize power and then delegate authority to a "government of national unity."

Paraguay, with a population of 4.5 million people, remains one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest countries. According to official figures, fully 30 percent of the population is either unemployed or underemployed. As throughout Latin America, the transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule was carried out through a process which insured that power remained in the hands of the financial elite, while providing immunity to the military and police for the killings, torture and illegal detentions carried out under the former regime.

In Paraguay power has remained in the hands of the Colorado Party, which has ruled the country without interruption since 1947, when it consolidated its power and banned all other parties. Leading aides to the dictator Stroessner continue to occupy senior positions in the ruling party.

Stroessner's successors, former army general Andres Rodriguez and Wasmosy, a construction tycoon, have carried out a policy of free market "reforms" which have intensified the attacks on the Paraguayan working class and peasantry. Repression, including assassinations and torture, have continued against those opposing the regime and the ruling elite, particularly the leaders of landless peasants who have attempted to occupy large tracts of underutilized land.

The United States Embassy, whose massive complex dominates the center of Asuncion, is playing a substantial role in the complex political machinations in the capital. Until now Washington has pursued a policy of maintaining unity between the civilian government and Paraguay's military command, in order to pursue free market economic policies while repressing the opposition of the workers and peasants. With the explosive situation created by Oviedo's candidacy, however, it may throw its support to an outright military solution.



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