

Paraguay's president ousted in parliamentary coup

Bill Van Auken
25 June 2012

Latin American governments have denounced the lightning-fast impeachment of Paraguay's president Fernando Lugo as a parliamentary coup and attack on constitutional government on the continent.

Lugo was indicted by the lower house of the Paraguayan parliament and tried by the upper house, the Senate, in a farcical set of proceedings that lasted barely 30 hours. The lower house voted unanimously in favor of the charges, while late on Friday, June 22, the Senate found the president guilty by a vote of 39 to four, significantly exceeding the two-thirds majority needed under the Paraguayan constitution to oust a sitting president.

Lugo joined a small demonstration in the early hours of Sunday morning outside a public television station to denounce his impeachment as a "coup against the citizenry and democracy."

In the immediate aftermath of the impeachment vote, thousands of peasants blockaded highways and demonstrators confronted riot police using rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon in Asuncion's Plaza de Armas. The president, himself, however, offered no resistance to his removal from office, nor did he appeal for any popular resistance.

Instead, Lugo declared his "submission" to the impeachment decision, declaring that he had always "acted within the framework of the law", even though the law had been "twisted" to remove him from office. He called on his supporters to carry out only "peaceful" protest, and he praised the armed forces for their contributions to "the consolidation of democracy."

The commanders of the military, who had mobilized forces in support of the parliamentary coup, immediately endorsed it and gathered behind Franco as he donned the presidential sash.

The principal charge brought against Lugo was a "weak performance" in relation to a forced eviction on June 15 of landless peasants who had occupied land owned by Blas Riquelme, a wealthy businessman and landowner, who was also a leading figure in the country's right-wing Colorado Party, which before Lugo's election had ruled the country for six decades.

The eviction of the some 100 families from the land in

Curuguaty in eastern Paraguay near the Brazilian border led to a massacre in which 11 peasants and six policemen were killed. Witnesses reported that the bloodbath began when snipers opened fire on the peasants as their leaders were negotiating with a police commander.

The Lugo government responded by sending the army into the area to impose order. Nine peasants, one just 15 years old, have been arrested and charged with murder.

While Lugo had called for an investigation into the massacre, offering to turn such a probe over to the police themselves together with the Colorado Party, i.e., those responsible for the killings, his right-wing opponents brushed the proposal aside, moving to impeach the president instead.

The charge against Lugo was based not on his responsibility for the murder of peasants, but rather for his supposed failure to use sufficient force to suppress them and employing empty populist rhetoric that aroused expectations among the country's most oppressed layers.

Elected in 2008, Lugo's triumph was generally reported as another example of the so-called "turn to the left" in Latin America. A former Catholic bishop, who embraced liberation theology and identification of the church with the poor, Lugo came into office as the candidate of the Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC), a loose coalition supported by various unions and peasant and community groups, but dominated politically by the center-right Authentic Radical Liberal Party, which provided Lugo's vice-presidential candidate, Federico Franco.

Various tendencies of what passes for the Paraguayan "left" promoted the conception that social change could be advanced in an alliance with "progressive sections of the bourgeoisie", and Lugo himself sought to present himself as a man of the "center", claiming that he was forging a path somewhere between those of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Brazil's former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

In Friday's impeachment, carried out just nine months before scheduled elections, the Liberals voted in favor of the constitutional coup, catapulting their man Franco into the

presidential palace.

While Lugo took office vowing to carry out agrarian reform, his government has accomplished next to nothing in altering a land distribution that is the most unequal on the continent. Approximately 2 percent of the population, dominated by immensely wealthy *latifundistas*, control over 77 percent of the country's arable land, while small farmers, who make up 40 percent of the population, owned barely 5 percent.

Inequality in the countryside was vastly increased under the 35-year dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, whose government rewarded loyalists with large tracts of land expropriated from peasants who had farmed it. Further exacerbating conditions has been the growth of soy production, dominated by Brazilian agribusiness, which has taken over substantial territory in Paraguay's eastern border region.

Even though Lugo neither carried out any significant land reform, nor protected peasants and small farmers from the violence routinely used by the big landowners and state forces against them, Paraguay's reactionary oligarchy and its representatives in the Colorado and Liberal parties blamed his election for raising the expectations of the country's rural poor, who in many cases occupied land illegitimately appropriated by the wealthy and politically connected in the vain hope that the government would intervene on their behalf.

The impeachment charges against Lugo included the statement: "The constant confrontation and struggle of social classes, which as a final result brought about the massacre between compatriots, is an unprecedented development in the annals of history since our independence until today."

Additional charges were brought over Lugo's having allowed a conference called "Latin American Youth for Change" to be held at a military base and his signing of a regional treaty—a seemingly innocuous document affirming respect for democratic principles—without parliamentary approval.

The ouster of Lugo drew sharp protests from a number of Latin American countries. "Without any doubt there has been a coup d'état in Paraguay," declared Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez Kirchner. "It is unacceptable." Argentina withdrew its ambassador from the country. Similar denunciations came from Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. Even the right-wing government in Chile was compelled to criticize the ouster of Lugo, with the country's foreign minister, Alfredo Moreno, stating that the hurried impeachment "did not fulfill the minimum requirements for this type of procedure."

The reaction of the Brazilian government of President Dilma Rousseff will be among those most closely watched, given the control exercised by Brazilian capital over much of the Paraguayan economy. This includes its joint ownership with Paraguay of the Itaipu dam—one of the world's largest hydroelectric

projects—which straddles the border between the two countries.

"The Brazilian government condemns the summary impeachment of the president of Paraguay decided on June 22, in which the right to defend himself was not properly guaranteed," said a statement issued by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Brazil indicated that sanctions could be considered within the Mercosur trading bloc and called its ambassador back for consultations, but did not follow Argentina's example in breaking diplomatic relations. One of the major organizations representing Brazilians inside Paraguay, including those controlling Paraguayan farmlands, called on Brasilia to recognize Franco as the country's new president.

In contrast to the condemnations from Latin American governments, the Obama administration issued statements expressing no direct opinion on the impeachment coup, but warning the Paraguayan people against resistance. The State Department called upon "all Paraguayans to act peacefully, with calm and responsibility."

There are many similarities between the ouster of Lugo in Paraguay and the coup carried out just three years ago in Honduras against President Manuel Zelaya, with Washington's backing. In both countries, the overthrow was accomplished through parliamentary maneuvers directed by right-wing politicians who the two presidents had previously embraced as allies.

Moreover, in both countries, the removal of the sitting president was accomplished with the backing of military commands with deep ties to the Pentagon. In Paraguay, these date back to the Stroessner dictatorship, which through decades of murders, torture and repression, kept the backing of five US administrations on the strength of the dictator's vigorously avowed anti-communism.

More recently, the Obama administration more than doubled US aid to the country's security forces last year, from \$3.9 million to \$8.2 million, under the banner of the "war on drugs".

The leading figure in the impeachment drive against Lugo was the Colorado Party senator and declared presidential candidate Horacio Cartes. A confidential State Department cable published by WikiLeaks identified Cartes and his Banco Amambay as being responsible for "80 percent of money laundering in Paraguay" on behalf of the drug traffickers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact