

Priest takes on Paraguay's party monopoly

A rural priest hopes to become Paraguay's president on his promise to fix long-standing social ills such as poverty, and in the process unseat a party that for 60 years has run the country top to bottom.

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ASUNCION, Paraguay --

For 60 years, Paraguay's Colorado Party has used political patronage -- as well as fraud and violence -- to remain in control of the country, longer than any other political party in the world that's still in power.

But now Fernando Lugo, 48, a country priest with no previous political experience, appears poised to bring that long run to an end -- a challenge that reflects a Latin America-wide trend against long-ruling political elites who have failed to deliver better lives for the poor.

In 2000, Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, which was then the world's longest-ruling, lost its first presidential election in more than 70 years. After that, former union head Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became Brazil's first president of working-class origins, Bolivia elected its first indigenous leader, and socially conservative Chile chose its first female president.

"Political parties all over Latin America are in crisis because they haven't responded to the social demands of Latin Americans," Lugo said during an interview with McClatchy in his office in a working-class neighborhood of the Paraguayan capital, Asunción.

BROAD COALITION

Lugo won the endorsement of Paraguay's top six opposition parties on July 18. If the coalition holds, he seems likely to wrest control of the country next spring from

the Colorado Party, which has long been seen as inseparable from the government.

Colorado Party chieftains run everything from the power company to the police department. Receiving basic services often means first asking the neighborhood Colorado office for help.

"If you're sick, it's faster to come to the party office than to the hospital," said Sady Yuvero, 33, and a party employee. "That way, you know you'll get to see a doctor."

And that's the problem, Lugo said.

"The Colorado Party in its long history has run its government machine and run the electoral judicial system and used state properties for political campaigns, but it's a model that's worn out," he said. "In 60 years, it didn't give a satisfactory response to the big social needs of the country."

With less than nine months to go before the vote on April 20, Lugo's presidential victory is far from secure, however. Political coalitions such as the one that's backing him, known as *Concertación*, have fallen apart on the eve of previous elections.

The Colorados, who control the country's electoral court and Supreme Court, also are expected to argue that Lugo's status as a priest bars him from holding elected office under the constitution.

Lugo announced last December that he had left the priesthood, but the Vatican hasn't officially released him from his duties.

With 6.7 million residents, Paraguay is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere and one of the region's most economically divided. Nearly half the population lives in poverty.

Despite the dismal numbers, Sen. Martin Chiola, the Colorado Party's vice leader in the senate, said the party deserved credit for steering the country through a civil war, the Cold War and all manner of political turmoil. Colorado governments include the brutal 35-year rule of dictator Alfredo Stroessner.

"It's a national feeling," Chiola said. "The Colorado Party was born with the nation itself. . . . It was launched by Paraguayans, and its ideology is eminently Paraguayan."

Most Paraguayans know the party not for its center-right ideology, however, but for its presence in practically every corner of public life.

For years, public-sector jobs went only to party members, which encouraged governments to build enormous bureaucracies that functioned as campaign machines, political columnist Alfredo Boccia Paz said. He estimated that about 200,000 people work in the public sector.

EXPECTATIONS

Lugo's rise has been helped by his reputation as a political outsider who spent years championing social causes in the country's most impoverished district, San Pedro, in central Paraguay.

Tall and charismatic, Lugo was first spotted as presidential material last year when he addressed an opposition rally of 50,000 people who had gathered to protest President Nicanor Duarte Frutos' plan to amend the constitution so that he could seek reelection.

The speech was only eight minutes long, but by its end, Lugo -- whose family had long been opposed to Colorado rule -- had become the leading opposition figure, Boccia Paz said.

What Lugo would do as president is the subject of speculation. The Colorados have accused him of being a radical socialist and friends with the convicted killers of the daughter of a former president, allegations that he denies.

Some critics suggest that he would ally himself with regional leftist leaders who have harshly criticized the Bush administration.

Lugo was vague about his agenda in the interview. He said his priorities would include cleaning up Paraguay's corrupt justice system, launching an agrarian reform program and strengthening the rule of law to attract more investment.

He suggested that discussing his ideology was a throwback to a different time.

"It's a discussion from the 1970s," he said.

"We just need bread, and it doesn't matter whether it's from the right or the left hand."