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A comfortable legitimacy?

Peña may have won Paraguay's elections, but the country is experiencing alarming poverty rates and gross inequalities. Political reform is inevitable

Santiago Peña, candidate for the Conservative Colorado Party, is the newly elected president of the Republic of Paraguay, following last Sunday's elections. With 42.74 per cent of the vote – one of the so far greatest outcomes in the democratic period – he won an unquestionable victory. Peña ended ahead of his closest challenger, the opposition coalition known as '*Concertación Nacional*', led by the Liberal Party candidate Efraín Alegre, by more than 15 per cent. It is safe to say that the recent shift to the left that has taken place in the region has not been echoed in Paraguay, where the conservative agenda seems to be consolidating.

The latest elections were the eighth truly competitive presidential elections since the fall of Stroessner's authoritarian regime in 1989. During the 34 years of Paraguay's young democracy, the Colorado Party ruled the country almost continuously, interrupted only by a single term (2008-2013). On that occasion, the opposition managed to unite around the charismatic and promising figure of ex-bishop Fernando Lugo, who, with the support of the Liberal Party, the left and other independent forces, won a resounding electoral victory. Yet, this political alliance ended in an unfortunate way, with the overthrow of Lugo (2012), the establishment of an exclusively liberal government under his Vice President Federico Franco (2012-2013) and the return to power of the Colorado Party in the 2013 presidential elections.

Since then, the opposition's challenge has been to achieve a successful alliance like the one in 2008, but efforts have not been successful. Despite attempts to consolidate a broad political agreement that would bring together the entire opposition, offering a mixed candidacy, the Colorado Party's opponents remained divided and their results were once again poor.

A right-wing discourse trap

The election campaign had many nuances. One of them, undoubtedly, has been the active involvement of the United States in the national political scene. During a press conference of the US Embassy in Asunción, for example, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued the classifications as 'significantly corrupt', both to former President and then candidate for the presidency of the Colorado Party, Horacio Cartes (2013-2018), and to the current Vice President and then pre-candidate for President of the Republic, Hugo Velázquez. However, the economic sanctions imposed on former President Cartes, by now leader of the Colorado Party, did not slow down his growth and ended up consolidating his political position, which is very much at odds with the more traditionalist faction of the party.

Polls were also at the epicentre of the electoral dispute. Throughout the campaign, various estimates circulated in different media outlets. Some of them were published by well-known pollsters, while others were of dubious origin. What is certain is that all of them, except for one (their own), were unfavourable to the *Concertación Nacional* presidential candidate. Yet, the opposition inflated its own polling data, using it as a central campaign tool.

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The electoral contest was also characterised by the predominance of conservative right-wing positions, which even flirted with anti-rights or self-proclaimed 'pro-life' groups. The agendas of women's rights, children's rights, diversity and those of other minorities were mainly left out of the electoral debates – in a country where two girls between the ages of 14 and 19 give birth every day, more than 60 transgender people have been killed since 1989 and a femicide is committed every 10 days.

The facts show that the opposition fell into a trap by believing that shifting its discourse to the right and avoiding issues with a more progressive agenda would offer it greater chances to compete against the entrenched Colorado Party. However, the opposition found itself facing an already convinced electorate, little seduced by its proposals and with an increasing level of dislike for its candidate Alegre. The maxims of 'useful vote' or choosing the 'lesser evil' were not effective as part of the opposition's strategy to win supporters. A lack of polarisation of ideas and the absence of a televised debate, for the first time in the democratic era, were other features that marked these elections.

The urgent need for political reform

The Colorado Party not only won the Presidency and Vice-Presidency of the Republic, it also won 15 of the 17 departmental governorships, 23 of the 45 seats in the Senate and 47 of the 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In 2019, law 6318, promoted by the right-wing *Patria Querida* (Beloved Fatherland) Party, had changed the rules of the political-electoral game. Since then, the latest elections were the first general elections in which the executive, legislative, governorships and departmental boards were re-elected under the new system of unblocked lists and preferential voting, in addition to electronic voting, which is highly disputed in other countries. The new rules of the political arena largely benefited the Colorado Party, which has a solid structure and a strong territorial presence. Other political forces, characterised by their lack of such a consolidated party structure and with limited political financing, were effectively eaten up.

One of the victims of this new voting system was the leftist coalition, the Guasú Front, led by former president Lugo since its formation in 2010. The progressive coalition – which managed to be the third-strongest political force providing seven senators in the previous legislative period – participated in this election in a divided manner, winning only one seat in the Senate, thanks to Esperanza Martínez, the former health minister in Lugo's government. A further potentially lethal blow to the coalition was the resignation of Lugo from the political arena due to his serious health condition, coupled with internal disagreement.

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However, this election also brought some favourable surprises – the victory of Johanna Ortega, a young, social democratic woman and candidate for deputy for the *Alianza por Asunción (Alliance for Asuncion Deputies)*. This is a clear sign that political reform is urgent and that 'change' and the political alternative are not something to be imposed, they are something to be built. Today, Martínez and Ortega are the only progressive and feminist representatives in Congress, which is a clear indication of the direction the next alternative political project should take.

The victory of economist Santiago Peña, Cartes' former finance minister, is only the beginning of an administration that will unfold in an international scenario marked by inflation, the economic and migratory crisis and war. The local context is no less complex and is marked by

alarming poverty rates, gross inequalities in access to basic fundamental services, high foreign debt and a conservative agenda that is ready to halt, in any way it can, the advance of social, political and economic rights for the most neglected sectors of Paraguay's population. The wide margin by which he won the presidency gives Peña a comfortable legitimacy, but if there is one thing that is certain, it is that nothing can be taken for granted.



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