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Paraguay's Ruling Party Faces Threat of a Populist Bishop

By LARRY ROHTER

ASUNCIÓN, Paraguay, Feb. 24 — No political party currently in power anywhere in the world has governed longer than the Colorado Party here, not even the Kim family's Communist dynasty in North Korea. But a charismatic Roman Catholic bishop recently suspended by the Vatican is threatening that hegemony and has emerged as the front-runner for next year's presidential election.

Known as "the bishop of the poor," Msgr. Fernando Lugo Méndez has been strongly influenced by liberation theology, which emerged in Latin America in the 1960s and contends that the Roman Catholic Church has a special obligation to defend the oppressed and downtrodden. But he is reluctant to position himself on the political spectrum, saying that he is interested in solutions, not labels.

"As I am accustomed to saying, hunger and unemployment, like the lack of access to health and education, have no ideology," he said in an interview here. "My discourse, my person and my testimony are above political parties, whose own members are desirous of change and want an end to a system that favors narrow partisan interests over those of the country."

The Colorado Party has been the ruling party here since 1947. Gen. Alfredo Stroessner led a dictatorship notorious for corruption and brutality from 1954 to 1989, but, thanks to its tight control of patronage and the bureaucracy, the party managed to retain control of the government even under the current system of free elections.

Monsignor Lugo, 55, is a spellbinding orator in both Spanish and Guaraní, the indigenous language spoken by the peasants and urban poor who make up a majority of the population in this landlocked country of 6.5 million. In speeches, he rails against corruption and injustice, saying, "There are too many differences between the small group of 500 families who live with a first-world standard of living while the great majority live in a poverty that borders on misery."

Recent polls here support Monsignor Lugo's status as the most respected and popular political figure in the country, and he runs ahead of all other potential candidates in such surveys. But both church and state are seeking to block his road to the presidential palace, which has led some of his supporters to threaten to take to the streets if he is disqualified.

The Constitution forbids ministers of any religious denomination to hold elective office, and the Roman Catholic Church enforces a similar prohibition on its clergy. Monsignor Lugo resigned from the priesthood in December to free himself from those restrictions, saying, "From today on, my cathedral will be the nation." But the Vatican, while suspending him from his duties, has rejected his request to be laicized.

In a letter made public on Feb. 1, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, the Vatican official who supervises bishops,

wrote that Monsignor Lugo must “remain in the clerical state and continue to be obliged to its inherent duties” because “the episcopacy is a service accepted freely and forever.” He added that “the candidacy of a bishop would be a cause of confusion and division among the faithful, an offense to the laity.”

Monsignor Lugo — he and his followers use the title, which is used for bishops in Latin America, despite his resignation from the clergy — ignored the ruling and declared his candidacy this month. Church officials have responded with warnings of more severe sanctions, with one Paraguayan bishop warning that he is “exposing himself to the punishment of excommunication” unless he desists.

With his clerical status in question, it seems likely that only the Supreme Court or the electoral tribunal here can determine his eligibility for office.

His legal advisers contend that the Vatican’s edict has no judicial validity in Paraguay. But both the court and the electoral tribunal are regarded here as beholden to the Colorado Party and therefore inclined to keep him off the ballot.

“The government is going to try to use the church’s arguments to kick him off the field, but Paraguay is a lay state, and the Constitution, not canon law, is the final authority,” said Rafael Filizzola Serra, a member of Congress who supports Monsignor Lugo and is a constitutional law specialist. “The pope does not have the authority to tell him he can’t run. Lugo has renounced the priesthood, and he has the same right as any citizen to be a candidate.”

José Alberto Alderete, the president of the ruling party, scoffed at speculation that the government was maneuvering to exclude Monsignor Lugo from the ballot, saying “We want to compete” and are confident of victory because “we are the party of change.” But he criticized Monsignor Lugo, calling him a dangerous and divisive rabble-rouser.

“Today he is preaching and inciting rebellion and confrontation” on the campaign trail instead of “advocating peace, understanding and unity from the pulpit,” Mr. Alderete said. “He is gaining support in some sectors, but he is awakening fear and suspicion in others.”

Monsignor Lugo’s adversaries have sought to undermine his support among the middle class, which has responded strongly to his anticorruption stance, by portraying him as a “Red bishop” and “radical priest” who would steer Paraguay sharply to the left. They suggest that if elected, he would immediately align himself with President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and President Evo Morales of neighboring Bolivia.

In published interviews, Monsignor Lugo has described what Mr. Chávez calls his “21st-century socialism” as “interesting and different” and “very stimulating.” But when asked to be specific about what he likes there, he took pains to distance himself from the Venezuelan model and said his relationship with the United States Embassy here was “very cordial and open” and would remain so if he became president.


“For me, the value of the Venezuelan experiment is the social dimension, the better distribution of wealth for the benefit of the poor majority,” he said. But that approach, he said, was also “linked to a strong dose of statism, totally at the service of one person,” and “a lack of pluralism,” which “is dangerous for a real democracy.”

He made clear his discomfort with the idea that he is any kind of “savior” or “messiah” for Paraguay, as both his followers and critics have sometimes suggested. His political style, say those who have observed him, stresses

cooperation rather than confrontation, and collaborative leadership over a cult of personality.

“As a priest, he has a good command of group dynamics, and is also a superb organizer,” said Marcial Riquelme, a Paraguayan sociologist. “He knows how to bring people together who don’t like each other and then to mediate all those various sectors to reconcile interests. That’s a remarkable ability in a country where we are normally at each other’s throats.”

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