

## **Background- Paraguay**<sup>1</sup>

Paraguay is a landlocked country with a population of 6 million wedged between Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia, whose territory includes large swaths of swampland, subtropical forest, and “Chaco wilderness” made of savanna and scrubland. Much of the land is in the hands of a tiny elite and successive governments have been slow to implement land reform. It remains one of the region’s poorest countries, with over 40% of its people living in poverty.

Political unrest, corruption and chronic economic problems have plagued the country’s fragile democracy since it emerged from the 35-year dictatorship of the late General Alfredo Stroessner in 1989. Mistreatment of prisoners and the dispossession of indigenous peoples continues to be a problem.

Before independence, Paraguay was the subject of territorial struggles among indigenous and Spanish groups. Originally, Paraguay was the home of the Guaraní people, who defended their independent villages from incursions by the Inca Empire. In the 1530s, Spanish settlers arrived searching for gold, touching off power struggles between urban Spanish settlers, rural Jesuit missionaries, the Spanish kingdom, and neighboring countries. In the early 1810s, Paraguay rejected competing territorial bids by Argentina and Brazil and declared its independence from Spain.

Following independence, Paraguay was ruled by a series of dictators who drove the country into the devastating War of the Triple Alliance against three of its neighbors. Paraguay’s first dictator, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (“El Supremo”) isolated the country and brutally repressed potential rivals, stripping Spanish elites of wealth and power and executing over 68 Guaraní elites suspected of participating in a coup attempt. Nevertheless, Francia left Paraguay relatively prosperous and his successor, dictator Carlos Antonio López, increased international trade and built a strong military to defend Paraguay from incursions by Argentina, Brazil, Britain, and the US. However, López unwisely passed power on to his ambitious son, Francisco Solano López. Emboldened by the military his father had built, Solano López simultaneously declared war on Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, who joined together to invade Paraguay in the War of the Triple Alliance. During a panicked retreat, Solano López executed hundreds of his own citizens, including two of his brothers, before dying in combat himself. The war killed over half of Paraguay’s population before it finally ended in 1870.

Miraculously, Paraguay emerged from the war as a democracy with largely intact borders. Brazil’s and Argentina’s mutual animosity forced both to withdraw and enabled Paraguay to keep much of its land and begin again under a democratic constitution. For over 60 years, Paraguay was a democracy with two competing political parties: the Colorados and the Liberals.

However, continuing conflict over Paraguay’s Chaco region lead to a new war and a spiral back into dictatorship. The Chaco region is located on Paraguay’s north western border with Bolivia and is primarily populated by Guaraní people. To finance its debts from the War of the Triple Alliance, Paraguay sold Guaraní land in Chaco to private investors. At the same time, Bolivia

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Hunter, *Author, Foreign and International Law Librarian at Loyola Law School*; Erin Gonzalez, *Chief IACHR Editor*; Cesare Romano, *Faculty Advisor*.

also began sending settlers and soldiers into Chaco, hoping to replace land Bolivia had lost to Peru in its own War of the Pacific. In 1932, Bolivia invaded Chaco, sparking a 1932-1935 war that killed 100,000 Paraguayans. In the chaos following the Chaco War, a series of generals staged repeated coups, deteriorating into a full blown civil war in 1947. Finally, in 1954, the Colorado party and the military staged a successful coup giving power to General Alfredo Stroessner.

From 1954 to 1989, General Stroessner ruled Paraguay as its president and de facto dictator. Economically, Stroessner championed the construction of the Itaipú hydroelectric dam, which generated financial gains but also displaced 10,000 families, mostly indigenous. Politically, Stroessner collaborated with other right wing dictators in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Chile as part of Operation Condor, an organized effort to arrest and disappear left wing dissidents.<sup>2</sup> Stroessner repeatedly tortured both Liberal leaders and moderate members of his own Colorado party, such as Dr. Agustín Goiburú Giménez. In the 1970s, Dr. Giménez fled to Argentina but the Argentinian military kidnapped him and returned him to Paraguay, where he was tortured and murdered.<sup>3</sup> Stroessner's power was backed by a large military, maintained by forcibly conscripting boys as young as 12 years old. One conscript, 15 year old Gerardo Vargas Areco, was tortured and shot to death in January 1989 after he attempted to flee the draft.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in February 1989, Stroessner was overthrown by his own second in command General Andrés Rodríguez Pedotti.

Since 1989, Paraguay has remained a democracy, but it is a fragile one. Under General Pedotti, Paraguay recognized the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' competence and loosened restrictions on the press and competing political parties. However, the Paraguayan government remained tied to Stroessner and the military and reluctant to hear criticism. In 1993, General Lino Oviedo backed the presidential candidacy of Colorado politician Juan Carlos Wasmosy. The rival presidential candidate, Ricardo Nicolás Canese Krivoshein, criticized Wasmosy's ties to Stroessner and involvement with the Itaipú power plant. After Wasmosy won the election, a court convicted Canese of criminal slander, fined him \$8,970, sentenced him to four months imprisonment, and prohibited him from leaving the country.<sup>5</sup> Wasmosy also quickly fell out with Oveido, prompting Oveido to attempt a coup in 1996 and then run against Wasmosy for president in 1998. During the 1998 presidential campaign, Wasmosy had Oveido arrested for his role in the 1996 coup, then lost anyway to Oveido's vice presidential candidate, Raúl Cubas Grau. Cubas freed Oveido but both Oveido and Cubas were forced to flee the country in 1999 after Oveido was implicated in the assassination of Vice President Luís María Argaña and the shootings of peaceful demonstrators.

Since 1999, Paraguay has been governed by a series of presidents who have been democratically elected but beset by corruption accusations and personal scandals. In 2008, voters elected

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Jean Schemo, *Stroessner, Paraguay's Enduring Dictator*, *Dies*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 16, 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/16/world/americas/16cnd-stroessner.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

<sup>3</sup> Goiburú et al. v. Paraguay, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 153 (Sept. 22, 2006), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/goibur%C3%BA-et-al-v-paraguay>.

<sup>4</sup> Vargas Areco v. Paraguay, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 155 (Sept. 26, 2006), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/vargas-areco-v-paraguay>.

<sup>5</sup> Ricardo Canese v. Paraguay, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 111 (Aug. 31, 2004), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/ricardo-canese-v-paraguay>.

President Fernando Lugo, a former Catholic Bishop known for his commitment to land redistribution. However, in 2012, the Senate impeached him following deadly clashes between squatters and police and revelations that he had fathered at least two children with his parishioners.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, protestors broke windows and set fires in Congressional offices after Congress introduced a bill that would have allowed President Horacio Cartes to run for a second term.<sup>7</sup> After Cartes bowed out of the election, voters elected the son of Stroessner's personal secretary, Mario Abdo Benítez.<sup>8</sup> Although Abdo Benítez did not openly support the former dictatorship, neither did he criticize it. Some of his supporters expressed a desire to return to the perceived law and order provided by the dictatorship, amidst concerns about Paraguay's growing crime problem and faltering justice system.<sup>9</sup>

Paraguay's deeply troubled prison system has generated repeated complaints to the IACHR. In 1996, human rights groups filed a petition with the IACHR alleging that children held at the Panchito López Juvenile Reeducation Institute suffered from overcrowding, inadequate facilities, beatings, and sexual assault. While the IACHR's final decision was pending, three electrical fires and a riot broke out, two children were stabbed, and two children were shot.<sup>10</sup> Despite the IACHR's order to improve prison conditions, Paraguay's prisons remain overcrowded and plagued by violence and fire, including a 2016 fire that killed six inmates and a guard.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Paraguay struggles with tensions over indigenous land ownership that date back to the War of the Triple Alliance and the Chaco War. Many Guaraní people in Chaco were displaced when Paraguay sold their lands to private investors to finance the War of the Triple Alliance. Many more were displaced by fighting between Paraguay and Bolivia during the Chaco War. Under Stroessner, Guaraní culture was suppressed with violence and contempt. Children who spoke Guaraní in the classroom were beaten, deprived of food and water, and forced to kneel on maize and wear diapers. Today, Guaraní activists are fighting to restore their culture and their

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Romero, *Senate's Vote Ousts Leader of Paraguay After a Clash*, N.Y. TIMES (June 22, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/world/americas/senates-vote-ousts-paraguay-president-after-clash.html>; Alexei Barrionuevo, *Left-Leaning President's Election Gives Hope to Landless Paraguayans*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 13, 2008), <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/world/americas/14paraguay.html>.

<sup>7</sup> *Paraguay President Sacks Top Officials After Protests*, BBC (April 2, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39470315>; Simon Romero, *Protests Erupt in Paraguay Over Efforts to Extend President's Term*, N.Y. TIMES (March 31, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/world/americas/paraguay-protests-horacio-cartes.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Laurence Blair, *Haunted By Ghosts Of Its Dictatorship, Paraguay Set To Pivot Back To The Right In Election*, THE GUARDIAN (April 29, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/20/paraguay-presidential-election-past-dictatorship-right>; *Paraguay Presidential Runner-Up Demands Recount*, REUTERS (April 24, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-paraguay-election/paraguay-presidential-runner-up-demands-recount-idUSKBN1HV2TU>; *Mario Abdo Benítez Wins Paraguay's Presidential Election*, BBC (April 23, 2018), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-43861104>; *Paraguay President Backs Off Re-Election Bid*, BBC (April 17, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39625409>.

<sup>9</sup> Santi Carneri and Ernesto Londoño, *His Father Aided a Dictator. Paraguay Elected Him President*, N.Y. TIMES (April 22, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/americas/paraguay-election-mario-abdo-benitez.html>; Simon Romero, *Deadly Heist Shakes a South American Borderland Trying to Shed Its Lawless Image*, N.Y. TIMES, (April 25, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/paraguay-robbery-ciudad-del-este.html>.

<sup>10</sup> *Juvenile Reeducation Institute v. Paraguay*, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 112 (Sept. 2, 2004), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/juvenile-reeducation-institute-v-paraguay>.

<sup>11</sup> *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016: Paraguay*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE (2016), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2016&dclid=265606>.

land. Guaraní is being taught in schools and to civil servants and used on signs and in popular music. Multiple indigenous communities have sought the return of their land before Paraguay's courts and the IACHR and, after repeated orders from the IACHR, the Paraguayan government has begun purchasing land for indigenous communities. Nevertheless, the situation remains dire for indigenous communities in Chaco, with many lacking food, running water, medical care, and a place to live. The Paraguayan government continues to collaborate with private land-owners to obtain court orders forcing indigenous communities off private land and public roads, to forcibly remove indigenous people from their lands, and to burn their homes, schools, and crops.<sup>12</sup>

### **More information**

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) and [BBC Country Profiles](#).

For an overview of the current human rights situation, see the [U.S. Department of State's 2017 Human Rights Report](#).

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<sup>12</sup> Sawhoyamaya Indigenous Community v. Paraguay, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 146 (Mar. 29, 2006), <https://iachr.lls.edu/cases/sawhoyamaya-indigenous-community-v-paraguay>; Xákmok Kásek Indigenous Community v. Paraguay, Application to the Court, Inter-Am. Comm'n H.R., Case No.12.420 (July 3, 2009), <https://iachr.lls.edu/cases/x%C3%A1kmok-k%C3%A1sek-indigenous-community-v-paraguay>; Yakyé Axa Indigenous Community v. Paraguay, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 125 (June 17, 2005), <https://iachr.lls.edu/cases/yakye-axa-indigenous-community-v-paraguay>; *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016*, *supra* note 11; Myles McCormick, *Newfound Pride in Guaraní, a Language Long Disdained in Paraguay*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 6, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/world/americas/paraguay-guarani-language.html>.