

The mysterious case of Paraguay president

Fernando Lugo: one, no one and one hundred thousand

Elected by popular acclaim in April 2008, he put an end to 60 years regime of the Partido Colorado (the infamous one of the dictator Stroessner). But since that historic victory, one speaks of the former bishop of San Pedro only for the sex scandals (four women claim to have had a child by him). Portrait of the most contradictory leader of South American continent

(published in the monthly newsmagazine "Galatea", april 2010)

You had never seen a Catholic bishop who became president of the republic. Less than ever in a country historically ruled by the army. Fernando Armino Lugo Mendez, born in 1951, is certainly a man of destiny, or simply the right man at the right time. In any case, he must leave the presidency in three years, since the constitution provides for only one term of Paraguay, it is unlikely he will be remembered for the things he was able to do (very few, in these first two years). But his name will remain a milestone in the history of free Paraguay.

What is the opinion about him? It is almost impossible to tell, because he, who embodied the hope of a country that seemed the emblem of the South American resignation, could also represent the Great Disappointment.

Paraguay in 2003 (see "Galatea", December issue) was already an exhausted nation: "nothing seems to move really in this country of quiet people, with too many soldiers on the street and still too much fear to talk about politics". Journalists had described the strange limbo as "democradura", somewhere between democracy and dictatorship.

The most long-lived caudillo on the continent, Alfredo Stroessner, the soldier, had been deposed by another soldier in 1989, and he lived his golden exile in Brazil (where he died four years ago, at age 93).

But the party of Stroessner, the Colorado Party everywhere in the state and in society, continued to rule with a multiparty system, and it had just made elect its last president, Nicanor Duarte Frutos, who enjoyed a decent image.

The army always smacked of coup, with General Lino Oviedo who was in and out the country's prisons. The Guarani people looked on, seemingly passive, the slow decline of a regime still too strong to be over, but too over to be really strong. They lacked a true alternative. To be honest, there was no real opposition.

The timid expectations raised by President Nicanor, journalist and former education minister go quickly to hell. Corruption, though not too denounced by all information media in the hands of oligarchy of the country, was part of daily life in Paraguay, which moreover got almost a third of revenue from border trade with Brazil and Argentina, through its Summit of Ciudad del Este. In short, this almost uninhabited country, stuck in the heart of South American continent over a thousand kilometers from the sea, live on agriculture, breeding and art of getting by.

Suffice it to say that even today the two historical parties, the Colorado Party in power since 1947, and opponents of the Liberal Radical Party, have more than one million members each out of a population of six million inhabitants. But this does not change the extreme poverty that covers 40 percent of the population. Paraguay can console itself only with Bolivia, placed last on the continent, however, which someone sees already in the process of overtaking. The poor, indigenous, *campesinos* are the true humus, where Fernando Lugo's vocation was born and where his story as pastor of the Church takes place. After working as a teacher in the poorest regions of Paraguay, the young Lugo entered the seminary in the early seventies. His training is the liberation theology, especially in the period Lugo spent in Ecuador. Permanently returned to Paraguay in 1987, after five years in Rome to complete his studies and stay away from Stroessner, who had already targeted him, Fernando Lugo takes over the poorest diocese in the country, San Pedro.

In his years in San Pedro, a town north of the capital Asunción along Paraguay River, the young bishop gives his best: he leads a modest life always on the side of the poor people, he preaches against the traditional Catholic faith instilled passivity, even with scornful gestures against the establishment, as when he refuses to celebrate the opening of the airport of San Pedro, (because his people have very different needs), he seeks to foster social action by turning up and down with an old car and in casual clothes.

He is open, friendly, free of arrogance, and certainly he has charisma: who knows him loves him, even though for most of the country remains an illustrious unknown.

The problem is that Lugo also exerts considerable charm on women, and he seems to be not willing to celibacy. In 2004, even when no one imagines his political parable, he is convened with great discretion by Church leaders in Asunción and interviewed about his relationship with a young lady who would have a son by him.

Faced with his responsibilities, Lugo vehemently denies, lying with conviction. This is his Achilles heel, it is above all his attitude of removing to leave dumbfounded the church hierarchy, which simply remove him from the diocese, appointing a new bishop.

It is clear that this reconstruction is unofficial, but very reliable. The facts, then, are stubborn, as a great journalist said, and they soon reappear after the presidency.

In the meantime, however, the stagnant political situation in Paraguay is shaken by a demonstration against the rampant corruption and in open opposition to President Colorado Nicanor.

It is the spring 2006.

The leaders of the mainstream parties are clear in trouble, because even though a formal opposition, they often accepted compromised (ie, assignments and positions) with the immovable Partido Colorado.

Eventually, it is decided that he talks for everyone, the bishop of the poor.

Speaking in front of the crowd that listened to him carefully, not to say with devotion, Lugo is consecrated leader "in pectore" of the opposition, legitimized by the people.

He is the man of providence, there is no doubt. The many groups of civil society think this and they already support him (peasants, Indians, Catholic groups); as well as the small left-wing parties and even the moderates of the Liberal Party.

Fernando Lugo did not really want to present himself as a candidate. But everyone asks it to him, starting from Tekojoja movement ("Equal Life" in Guarani), which comes with the plan to bring him to the presidency (even though many people think more the elections of 2013 than those of 2008).

The star of Lugo shines brighter every day, the bishop begins to appear everywhere, he is now fully convinced of his role, so much so that, after being suspended "a divinis" by Vatican (which does not admit candidates for the religious) he even asks for reduction to the lay state (normally considered the most severe punishment) and get it.

On April 20, 2008 Lugo wins the election, with a surprising margin. They particularly feared the competition of the old coup general Lino Oviedo, the great demagogue, with his informal and direct style as a friend of everybody, who presented himself as an opponent, and that paradoxically could obtain the same ultra-popular vote that supports Lugo. But, after more than 60 years of unchallenged rule, the party created by Stroessner lost power, and Lugo came into history.

For many political analysts, it is the real beginning of democracy in Paraguay. It took nearly twenty years after the fall of Stroessner: too many. It is no coincidence that to determine the crushing victory of Lugo were especially young people, who were not politically neutered by the most iron dictatorship of the whole continent. This trend is fundamental in a country that has 65 percent of the population under 30 years.

The first months of the Presidency, the so-called "honeymoon", flow smoothly. On the other hand, Lugo has always been a moderate politician, he has never made revolutionary speeches, he has never announced radical changes, but only "a better distribution of wealth". His heart is on the side of the poor, no doubt about this, but his political culture is weak after all, and certainly it is not confrontational, but oriented to the consultation. The problem is that he has to face an ultra-

conservative oligarchy of landowners and farmers, all export-oriented and servant of the food farming multinational, starting from all-powerful Cargill.

That means a minimum investment in the country, very little work (it only takes one man to care 500 acres of soybeans, the food product par excellence) and, most importantly, zero taxes. To this oligarchy of landowners land reform is an eyewash: just think that in Paraguay there is not yet the land registry (!).

The lacking entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, in a country largely devoid of middle-class, lives of business with the state, almost always opaque. And here is problem number two: the Colorado Party is still the largest party in the country, men in all institutions, starting from the judiciary and the army, and it is still well entrenched throughout the public administration.

Despite the moderate attitude of Lugo, all of these areas have decided to keep him under pressure, to avoid misunderstandings. Press and television are firmly in their hands.

It is in this context, almost certainly, that one after the other, the sex scandals of 2009 burst, exactly one year after the election. The stories border on the unbelievable, and the attitude of Lugo is almost surreal, his ambiguity fuels this serial soap opera that seems to have no limits (except those of ridicule: there is someone who speaks of 17 natural children of the bishop-president!). The first is Viviana Carrillo, a 26-year-old who says to have a two years old son by the President. Lugo is a family friend since her confirmation, and he often sleeps at her house. The relationship began when she was only 16. The scandal is huge, people speak of rape, but Viviana indeed defends her love for the President. He, leaving everyone dumbfounded, recognizes the child, and apologizes to the country and the Church.

Made a breach in the silence, here comes Benigna Leguizamón, 27, a woman who used to clean the diocese of San Pedro, where she had come as minor and already with a dependent child. She is almost certainly the woman who had caused his expulsion from the diocese of Lugo, as such child is seven years old. Another very young lover who, in contrast to Viviana, aided in recent years the former bishop, lives in poverty in Ciudad del Este, with four dependent children (including those taken with Lugo), forgotten by everyone and with health problems, so much so that in December 2009 she abandons the cause (which she will resume - she says - at the end of the mandate). At this point, even Damiana Hortensia Morán appears, 40, teacher, activist and participant in the Catholic Church campaigned for President Lugo. A great love, based on mutual respect, so much so that she declares that she will not sue to the president for recognizing the third of her children (the first two are already adult, and she is divorced from her husband, who gave the surname also to the two years child). Actually, after a few months and after "disappointing answers" of Lugo, Damiana also turns to the judge. This time, however, the president says he will have a DNA testing, and therefore he figures to have some chances.

To make matters worse, in late 2009 Lugo's niece, the daughter of her sister Mercedes who also plays the role of *primera dama*, accuses her uncle to be the real father of a 22 years old family friend, Fatima Rojas. What's more, it is said that the President would also placed in the administration his "son-in-law". With the Fatima's one, there would be four children by four different women.

The great thing is that Lugo never strongly denied, at the beginning, none of these paternity (two of which can be regarded as certain). Even more extraordinary is the fact that now the zenith of the scandal was over, and it is clearly understood that people of Paraguay, Guaraní people so Catholic in shape as relaxed in sexual mores, do not judge him for that.

No, it is about the social issue that Lugo plays the great confidence that the ordinary people and the poor has granted him. In the first two years they have not seen any concrete improvement.

The only serious measure, the right to public health service established by law, however important, remains largely unrealized for the painful conditions in which most of the state outpatient's department are. For the rest, any question has been touched, starting from the long-awaited land reform.

It is clear that Lugo has neither a real party, nor a real parliamentary majority. It is clear that the media contrast him. But people are on his side, they still believe in him, despite everything, and

they prefer to blame parliament for the impasse (with good reasons, but saving Lugo beyond his merits: if the economy minister, Borda, is the same of Nicanor government, and if the vice president, Franco, is a liberal and not a representative of the indigenous or peasants as requested by the base, it is depended only on the choices of the former bishop).

In short, Paraguay, which suffered much and unjustly in the course of its history (see previous report on this site), still seems far from the turning point it needs.

Lugo has started badly, because he cared more not to alienate the oligarchies than answer to his people. They are people who still take to the streets to support him. Betraying their trust would be, at the end, the greatest sin to forgive.

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