

Elections in times of conflict in Paraguay

By Liliana Rocío Duarte Recalde

Municipal elections were held in Paraguay in October 2021 after being postponed for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to elect 261 Mayors, 2,781 Municipal Councilors and their respective alternates throughout the country. The context for these elections presented an unusual scenario for electoral competition in this country, related to the effects of the pandemic on the population that exacerbated lingering social conflicts.

Governmental inability to strengthen the national health system to face the spread of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic, along with persistence of corruption in different policy areas, led to a series of protests against the government. Protests also focused on the ruling political party Asociación Nacional Republicana (ANR), also known as the Colorado party, which has governed this country for the better part of the last century.

A few months before the elections, in March 2021, a request for impeachment against the President and Vice President was put forward after a series of protests took place throughout the country. Citizen discontent appeared as a direct consequence of the government's lack of capacity to respond to the challenges presented by the pandemic: the health system was proving to be unable to cope with the growing demand for medical care, the public education infrastructure didn't get ready to resume face-to-face classes safely, sanctions for breaking quarantine measures appeared to be enforced arbitrarily, the negative economic effects were prevalent among middle-income and lower-income sectors, and the perception of corruption of the public office intensified.

The first massive protest held on March 5 ended with clashes between police and protesters after heavy repression, which were followed by a wave of protests that lasted several weeks. Civic discontent reached a critical point when a building occupied by the ANR was arsoned after congressional rejection of the impeachment trial. The slogan "ANR never again" was constantly chanted among protestors, as they identified the current administration's deficiencies as evidence of the country's weak state capacity, as a result of the decades of state control by the same ruling party.

Although Paraguay has a [multi-party system](#), there are two traditional parties that have been predominant since the 19th century and maintain a strong presence throughout the country: the Colorado party and the Liberal party (Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico - PLRA). These two parties have regularly concentrated [84% of the votes](#) since the breakdown of authoritarian rule in 1989, with the Colorado party being the strongest one. Paraguayan political parties are not historically differentiated by cleavages and it's been only over the last decade that there is a small but regular presence of left-wing parties, which signifies the presence of ideological diversity in this country. In light of this scenario, the main proposal opposition parties presented was to dismantle the corruption that permeates the Colorado rule.

A greater state of vulnerability of the population after over a year of loss of resources, lives and overall well being favored a strong political machine capable of providing targeted assistance to their constituents, which has proven to be a successful strategy in Paraguay. In particular, ANR's electoral strength is linked to the bureaucratic power accumulated during the decades of dictatorial rule (1954-1989) and the years following the regime change, when they remained in control of the national government. The widespread use of these resources, along with the opposition's inability to present

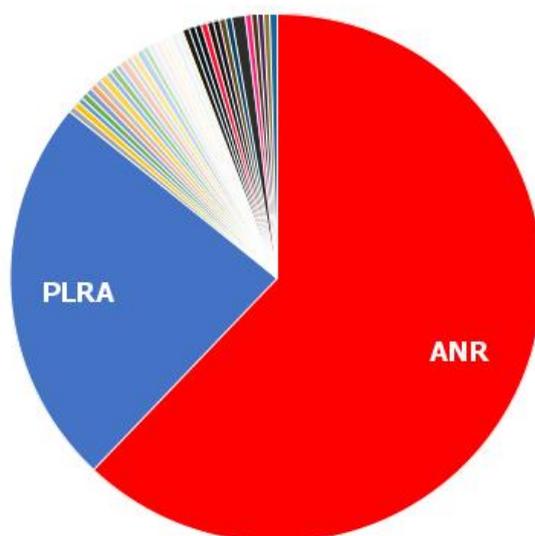
candidacies powerful enough to aggregate their votes, led once again to victory in most districts in spite of social unrest.

Table 1: Municipal governments won by ANR since the regime change							
	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2015	2021
Number of districts	155	162	146	152	135	148	162
Percentage of districts	76,4%	73,3%	66,4%	66,1%	56,7%	59,2%	62,1%

Source: [Dosek, Pérez Talia and Duarte-Recalde 2016](#) and [TSJE](#)

As seen on Table 1, ANR has consistently won the majority of municipal elections over the last couple of decades, which has allowed them to remain in close contact with the population, systematically claim credit for public policies and maintain clientelistic networks throughout the Paraguayan territory. As a result of this month’s elections, this party leads the political control of the country with 162 municipalities (Figure 1), surpassing the 147 that they had won in 2015. The party with second most municipal governments under their control is the PLRA, having won 62 municipalities (23.8%). These results confirm the strength of the Colorado electoral machinery to mobilize its voters even in contexts of citizen discontent.

Figure 1: Proportion of municipalities won by parties in 2021



This continuity in the Paraguayan political system takes place amid socio-political changes that present a scenario ever more complex. On the one hand, there appears to be a critical mass more prone to take their grievances to the streets than previous generations in order to influence political decisions. On the other hand, polarization in discourse

related to liberal values is creating rifts among the population that seem increasingly difficult to overcome, which hinders the formation of political alliances that would eventually be strong enough to face the Colorado power deep-seated in the bureaucracy. The ever present sources of social conflict in this country appear to coexist with a political system that's unable to process them electorally, therefore rendering the Paraguayan democratic process a source of discontent in itself.