

## PARAGUAY 2022: PERSONALIZATION WITHIN A STRONG PARTY SYSTEM\*

*Paraguay 2022: Personalización dentro de un sistema de partidos fuerte*

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### ABSTRACT

The year 2022 in Paraguay was marked by internal elections of political parties and scandals related to corruption, insecurity, and organized crime. Former president Horacio Cartes was elected as the new president of the governing ANR, and his candidate, Santiago Peña, won the ANR internal elections to become the ruling party's presidential candidate in 2023. The article argues that in this context, the two traditional parties opted, paradoxically, for opposing strategies, albeit with strong personalistic elements in both cases. In a political system characterized by a combination of personalistic politics and strong party machines, Cartes achieved to dominate the political scene, despite accusations of corruption against him. We argue that he diverted the attention from the corruption charges to conservative anti-gender issues in the public agenda and used this discourse to win ANR internal elections in the second half of the year. We also show that the ossification of the Paraguayan party system had negative consequences for democracy in the country in 2022, related to the personalization of political parties, corruption scandals in politics, and increased public insecurity and drug trafficking. Although party system collapse is unlikely, we conclude the article by showing that Paraguay can offer some comparative lessons for democracy in other Latin American countries.

**Keywords:** Paraguay, personalization, political parties, corruption, internal elections.

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## RESUMEN

*El año 2022 en Paraguay estuvo marcado por elecciones internas de los partidos políticos y escándalos relacionados con la corrupción, la inseguridad y el crimen organizado. Horacio Cartes, ex presidente del país, fue elegido como nuevo presidente de la ANR, y su candidato, Santiago Peña, ganó las elecciones internas del partido para convertirse en el candidato presidencial del oficialismo colorado en 2023. El artículo argumenta que en este contexto, los dos partidos tradicionales optaron paradójicamente por estrategias opuestas, aunque con fuertes elementos personalistas en ambos casos. En un sistema caracterizado por una combinación de líderes personalistas y maquinarias partidarias fuertes, Cartes logró dominar la escena política pese a las acusaciones de corrupción contra él. El artículo muestra cómo desvió la atención de los problemas de corrupción hacia la agenda conservadora anti-género y usó ese discurso para ganar las elecciones internas de la ANR en la segunda mitad del año. El trabajo también ilustra cómo la osificación del sistema de partidos ha tenido efectos negativos sobre la democracia en el país en 2022, resaltando la personalización de los partidos políticos, los escándalos de corrupción y la creciente inseguridad pública y presencia de narcotráfico en el país. El artículo concluye que si bien el colapso del sistema de partidos es poco probable, el caso paraguayo puede ofrecer algunas lecciones comparadas para el funcionamiento de la democracia en otros países latinoamericanos.*

**Palabras clave:** Paraguay, personalización, partidos políticos, corrupción, elecciones internas.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2022 in Paraguay was marked by the internal elections of political parties in preparation for the general elections in April 2023, as well as scandals related to corruption, insecurity, and the growing presence of organized crime in the country. Paraguay entered 2022 following the 2021 municipal elections, and during the main part of the year experienced preparations and campaigns for the internal elections of party candidates, as well as the election of party authorities within the ruling *Partido Colorado* (National Republican Association, ANR), which took place simultaneously in mid-December. The winners of the internal elections would compete in the elections for new national and departmental political authorities in April 2023. This intense three-year electoral period shifted the focus of the second half of President Mario Abdo's term from the COVID-19 pandemic to the country's structural problems, electoral dynamics, and internal conflicts within ANR.

In this context, the country's former president (2013–2018) Horacio Cartes' election as the new president of the ANR, as well as being declared as involved in "significant corruption" by the US government were the most significant events of the year. Cartes' and the *Honor Colorado* (HC) faction candidate, Santiago Peña, won the ANR internal elections to become the ruling party's presidential candidate in 2023. Thus, Cartes, a businessman and political leader with no party affiliation before 2009, managed to once again lead one of the traditional and longest-standing political parties in Latin America, demonstrating his political relevance. This may seem paradoxical in a country where, more than any other in the region, the two main political parties dominate public

life (Pérez Talia 2019; Abente 2022). Is the personalization of politics growing? The Paraguayan case exemplifies party system and political parties' "ossification" (Piñeiro Rodríguez & Rosenblatt 2020, Rosenblatt 2021) that react to their crisis by doubling down on personalism and private financing. However, contrary to what the literature suggests, the Paraguayan party system is far from collapsing due to its particular characteristics, exhibiting what we refer to as "personalized politics with parties." In this sense, Paraguay illustrates the (problematic) adaptation and costs of the "over-institutionalization" (Schedler 1995) of traditional political parties for democracy in the region (Dosek 2019).

The article argues that in this context, the two main electoral actors opted for paradoxically opposing strategies in the internal elections, albeit with strong personalistic elements in both cases. On the one hand, the ANR plunged into a fierce internal struggle between the two main factions—the traditionalist faction linked to President Abdo and the challenging faction led by Cartes—betting on the combination of the technocratic figure of Santiago Peña and the economic power of Cartes, who finally emerged as winners. On the other hand, the main opposition party, the *Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico* (PLRA), led by Efraín Alegre, pursued a coalition strategy by conforming a multiparty platform called *Concertación Nacional para un Nuevo Paraguay* (National Coalition for a New Paraguay, CN) to confront the ANR. Therefore, while the strongest party promotes the figure of the young technocrat with support from non-traditional business power amidst strong factional conflict, the *liberales* turn to a traditional leader and three-time candidate in search of broad support across the party spectrum. This article explores the role of the dominant leadership within each political organization in the parties' strategies and their lessons learned.

The article is organized as follows. First, we present the results of the 2021 municipal elections and the political context in which the country was immersed at the beginning of 2022. Second, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the article, arguing that the ossification of the party system has negative consequences for political representation, such as the personalization of politics, corruption, and the scarce attention to the country's unresolved structural problems. Third, we show how the Cartes-led faction of ANR managed to divert public attention from corruption scandals to an instrumentally generated discussion on conservative agenda issues, which have always been politically attractive in this country. Fourth, we describe the results of the internal elections. Lastly, we draw some brief conclusions about the political landscape leading up to the general elections of 2023 in light of other Latin American countries experiences.

## II. POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF 2022

Paraguayan politics is characterized by an intense electoral calendar and the centrality of elections in mobilizing citizens and shaping the public agenda. The public sphere has been characterized by an ongoing presence of electoral

competition following the prolonged transition to democracy and the gradual opening of the political system to new political parties. These characteristics further intensified in the 2021–2023 triennium, as the municipal elections were postponed from 2020 to 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the country entered the year 2022 with the results of the previous year's local elections and the strengthening of the ANR's presence throughout the territory, preparing for the internal elections of party candidates and authorities in the face of the April 2023 general elections.

The two traditional parties—ANR and PLRA—dominate the Paraguayan political system. These parties capture the vast majority of offices both at national and local level (Abente 2022; Dosek et al. 2016; Filártiga-Callizo 2018; Martínez Escobar 2013; Pérez Talia 2019). Their position is exceptional even in comparison with other regional party systems with important historical political parties such as Uruguay, Colombia, or Honduras (Abente 2022: 129), where strong and viable alternatives have emerged. In Paraguay, the space for third parties is relatively limited and the actors unstable, although the Frente Guasú (FG), a coalition of center-left and left-wing parties led by Fernando Lugo since 2008 (Martínez Escobar 2013), maintained a sustained presence. The traditional Paraguayan parties are anchored both in significant party identification and membership, along with strong emotional ties (Morínigo 2008; Lachi & Rojas Scheffer 2018), discursive resources that underpin the legitimacy of their political power (Bourscheid 2018), as well as in a territorial organizational structure and clientelistic ties with their electoral bases (Abente 2022; Dosek 2023; Setrini 2011). These elements allow for a vertical aggregation through pyramidal party structures from the grassroots to the national elites, while at the same time complicate the entry of alternative parties with more programmatic proposals to the arena.

The results of the municipal elections in October 2021 only confirmed the predominant position of the two traditional parties across the territory, particularly that maintained by ANR, and the existence of an “asymmetric bipartisanship” in the country (Villalba 2021; Duarte-Recalde & Gonzalez-Tiepermann 2021). These elections took place after an electoral reform that changed the ballot structure for proportional representation from closed and blocked lists to open lists with preferential voting and regulated political financing control (Villalba & Filártiga-Callizo 2022). The effects of the first reform could even reinforce the dominance of traditional parties by shifting the patterns of competition from inter-party to within-party ones and strengthening candidates with greater access to economic resources. On the one hand, rejecting a party no longer implies not voting for the political organization *per se* but rather favoring through preferential voting, for example, candidates not associated with corruption scandals. On the other hand, the use of preferential voting leads to the personalization of party competition and, among other consequences, to a greater role of the respective candidates' financial resources. In turn, in a context of low state control this can contribute to a greater presence of illicit resources in politics (Villalba & Filártiga-Callizo 2022).

In line with existing trends in the country (Table I), ANR and PLRA won most of the local governments. Data from the TSJE reveal that the two parties obtained over 85% of government offices, with *colorados* leading with 163 and the *liberales* with 62. Electoral coalitions formed mainly around the PLRA occupied the remaining 36 municipalities. Cartes' biggest success came in Asunción, where Oscar "Nenecho" Rodríguez was elected, having been acting mayor of the capital since 2019.<sup>1</sup> Despite his legal issues concerning the city administration, Rodríguez won the elections with a 15,000 votes margin, equivalent to five percentage points advantage.

Table I: Municipalities governed by traditional parties in Paraguay (1991-2021)

Political party	1991	1996	2001	2006	2010	2015	2021
ANR	155 (76.35%)	162 (73.3%)	146 (66.36%)	152 (66.09%)	135 (56.72%)	148 (59.2%)	163 (62.45%)
PLRA	41 (20.20%)	48 (21.72%)	66 (30%)	68 (29.57%)	86 (36.13%)	75 (30%)	62 (23.75%)
Otros partidos	7 (3.45%)	11 (4.98%)	8 (3.64%)	10 (4.35%)	17 (7.14%)	27 (10.8%)	36 (13.79%)
Total	203	221	220 <sup>1</sup>	230	238	250	261

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Dosek *et al.* (2016) data from TSJE (<https://www.tsje.gov.py/>).

Note: <sup>1</sup> No elections were held in three municipalities out of the 223.

The municipal elections were marked by political violence (Villalba 2021; Duarte-Recalde & Gonzalez-Tiepermann 2021). This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in local elections in the continent, as recently observed in Mexico or Ecuador, and common even in countries where it was previously not frequent or visible. In Paraguay, at least a dozen attacks occurred in several departments before the 2021 municipal elections, resulting in many deaths among candidates affiliated with different political parties (Villalba 2021; Duarte-Recalde 2021).

The December 2022 internal elections took place in the context of these election results and escalating security problems in the country, as well as the government of President Mario Abdo (ANR, 2018–2023). The selection of electoral candidacies and ANR authorities occurred during Abdo's final year of presidency. Abdo came to power in 2018, succeeding Horacio Cartes in the presidential offices and initiating the intra-party alternation in the country's top political office. In the 2018 elections, Abdo defeated Santiago Peña, Cartes' preferred candidate.

<sup>1</sup> Rodríguez took office after the resignation of Mario Ferreiro due to allegations of corruption.

The Abdo government confronted COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020 (López & Duarte-Recalde 2021), but by mid-2021, cases had dropped and 60% of the population had received at least one vaccine dose (Última Hora, 2023a). The government's mismanagement of the pandemic provoked protests in the country, and in March 2021, Abdo and his VP Hugo Velázquez faced unsuccessful impeachment (Duarte-Recalde 2021). By mid-2022, nearly 80% of citizens disapproved of Abdo's government (Última Hora 2022a).<sup>2</sup>

Abdo's *colorado* government has had mixed economic results (Table II). GDP growth has fluctuated since 2018, mirrored by the COVID-19 pandemic, initially rising to 3.4%, followed by two years of decline. In 2021, the country saw a rebound, yet it was substantially retraced by 0.2% growth in 2022. According to the Banco Central de Paraguay (Central Bank of Paraguay, BCP), the country expects a 4.5% growth in 2023. Inflation followed the same trajectory, with the lowest rate (2.2%, according to the Consumer Price Index) registered in 2020 during the pandemic and peaking at 8% in 2021. The CPI for 2023 is projected to be around 5%. Unemployment hit its peak in 2020 (7.2%) and decreased to 5.7% in 2022, returning to pre-pandemic figures. These macroeconomic results help to explain Abdo's poor approval ratings and Cartes' strengthened position within the ANR.

Table II: Economic growth, inflation and unemployment in Paraguay (2018-2022)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
GDP growth	3.4	-0.4	-0.8	4	0.2 <sup>1</sup>
Inflation (CPI)	3.2	2.8	2.2	6.8	8.1
Unemployment <sup>2</sup>	5.6	5.7	7.2	6.8	5.7

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from the Central Bank of Paraguay (BCP) and the National Institute of Statistics (INE).

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Preliminary figure, <sup>2</sup>Data for the fourth quarter that tend to be years' lowest values

Abdo faced opposition from his own party's competing faction and was therefore obligated to form agreements with the opposition to advance his agenda. Examples include an investigation involving the country's Attorney General, Sandra Quiñónez, and the appointment of former Liberal senator Víctor Ríos as Minister of the Supreme Court of Justice. These successes supposedly illustrated an "*Abdo-Luguista* Pact" that was criticized by politicians from the HC faction (ADN Digital 2021; La Nación 2021a). The critiques towards Abdo and the power struggle within the ANR grew during the pandemic. Using a traditional ANR strategy of being a government and an opposition party at the same time, the Cartes faction of the party sought to distance itself from the unpopular

<sup>2</sup> Abdo's approval ratings were lower than Cartes' upon the start of their respective terms in office (Abente 2020).

national government, claiming that the country was being led only by Abdo's *Añetete* movement. Notable HC leaders, such as Pedro Alliana, Basilio Núñez, and Walter Harms, openly and publicly criticized the government (ABC Color 2022a, La Nación 2021b, La Nación 2022).

Reciprocally, the government also sharply attacked the Cartes-led sector of the party. Both Abdo and Cartes further intensified during the bid for the ANR presidency (Última Hora 2022b). This conflict between the two main *colorado* factions monopolized the country's public agenda during the first half of the year. In July, US government officials publicly declared ANR leading figures involved in "significant corruption" which together with the public discussion about the conservative agenda issues dominated the country's political life in the second party of the year up until parties' internal elections held in December.

### III. THREE CONSEQUENCES OF AN OSSIFIED PARTY SYSTEM: PERSONALIZATION, CORRUPTION AND INSECURITY

Ossified party systems are characterized by stability in terms of political actors, but also by weak capacity to incorporate new demands and channel societal interests (Piñeiro Rodríguez & Rosenblatt, 2020). Existing players create a "cartel" that hinders adaptation and prevents new actors from entering the system (Katz & Mair 1995). Ultimately, this can lead to "abrupt changes" (Piñeiro Rodríguez & Rosenblatt, 2020, p. 253) and emergence of new actors, resulting in the decline of existing parties and instability of the system.

Despite featuring several attributes of an ossified system, such as limited access for third parties and little citizen involvement (Piñeiro Rodríguez & Rosenblatt 2020: 267–268), the Paraguayan party system is unlikely to succumb to or experience the sudden transformation suggested by the authors. Paraguay's political system and parties have three key characteristics that contribute to their stability. First, intra-party factions and competitive internal elections provide a means to channel discontent without destabilizing the system, allowing for new actors and leaders to emerge. This facilitates renewal of party candidates and elites replacement but has no long-term effect on overall stability. At the same time, these patterns coexist with leadership personalization and inter-faction volatility.

Second, high levels of party activism and party identification with the main parties (Morínigo 2008; Dosek 2016; Lachi & Rojas Scheffer 2018, Abente 2022) hinder the rise of strong third parties outside of the traditional two. This is due to strong emotional ties and loyalty to party symbols, akin to soccer fans fanaticism (Lachi & Rojas Scheffer 2018). The socialization of new generations into their party largely determines their vote, making it difficult for third parties to compete via programmatic appeals and non-traditional symbols. Nonetheless, competition does exist within parties, where identity remains

the same, albeit with varied leadership and intra-party fragmentation in legislative bodies and at the subnational level. As Morgan (2011) posits, party systems weaken mainly due to the erosion of party-voters linkages; however, in the Paraguayan context, despite generational changes and socio-economic modernization, this process is gradual at best and systemic change is unlikely to occur in the near future.

Third, these linkages are reinforced by clientelistic relationships between traditional parties' politicians and a large part of citizens. The logic of party machines and pyramidal structures typical for both ANR and PLRA elevates the costs for alternative political parties that prefer to run a programmatic campaign or seek to challenge traditional parties' patronage networks. To compete, they need strong economic resources from the state, private capital, or another source. Thus, the space for third parties is limited and their position marginal and unstable, often leading them to form coalitions or alliances, particularly with the PLRA.

In this context, Paraguayan political parties indeed aggregate interests vertically, even if in a clientelistic manner, and thus fulfill one of the main functions of political parties (Luna et al., 2022). While the other key function, horizontal coordination, may be comparatively weaker in the Paraguayan case (Luna et al., 2022; Abente, 2022), the majority of candidacies and, as mentioned before, also public offices are controlled by politicians from the two traditional parties. Again, the apparent lower coordination may be due to the significant presence of factions and personalistic regionally leaderships running under the same umbrella of the *colorado/liberal* identity and party label. Consequently, although not coordinated (and sometimes fragmented), during electoral periods they end up controlling the majority offices, given that there are few incentives to leave the party; the permissiveness of internal leadership and the existence of well-functioning internal elections facilitate the predominance of traditional parties.

However, even Paraguayan parties did not escape the regional trend of attracting "new faces", non-partisan leadership, and celebrities or athletes who could be appealing to the electorate. Therefore, within both parties, showbiz candidacies emerged (e.g., famous TV personalities, hosts, former models, journalists, or athletes), especially in subnational elections (Gomez Valdez, 2017; Hoy, 2021). The traditional parties even reduced the requirements in terms of membership duration to encourage more electorally attractive candidacies (Pérez Talia, 2019). Indeed, the diminished importance of party trajectory found its maximum expression in the person of Horacio Cartes, as well as in some members of the presidential lists of both parties.

These characteristics of an ossified party system and dominant traditional parties have resulted in at least three consequences for politics in Paraguay: the personalization of parties, the presence of corruption scandals in politics, and increased public insecurity and higher presence of drug trafficking in the country. The following three subsections analyze these phenomena in the context of 2022.

## Personalization with political parties: The leadership of Horacio Cartes

The leadership of Horacio Cartes and the presidential candidacy of Santiago Peña illustrate the increasing importance of individual leadership, with a more limited party trajectory and the character of an outsider. However, as mentioned, these leaders run on the traditional parties' ballots and therefore constitute what we call "personalized politics with parties." As Rahat (2018) proposes in his classification of party types, the relationships between leaders and parties vary. However, his analysis does not take into account the combination of parties with significant party structures and strong leaders with centrality in the factional disputes (particularly important at the national level). In this context, the emergence of new leadership does not necessarily occur through third parties or independent candidacies, given the characteristics of the Paraguayan party system and electoral legislation.

The incorporation of Cartes into the party began shortly after ANR's defeat in the 2008 elections and its exit from the national government. He was not a member of the party previously and did not even vote in the past elections (Brítez 2019: 102). According to available evidence, he was invited by Juan Carlos Galaverna, a traditional party leader, as the party found itself in a *llano* and needed a new *patrón* (Brítez 2019: 100; Abente 2012: 236). Therefore, Cartes entered thanks to his personal wealth essentially to finance the party machine (Brítez 2019). The ANR had to change the party's statutes at a convention held in January 2011, to allow the candidacy of party members with less than 10 years of party membership. This amendment was implemented specifically to allow for Cartes' presidential candidacy, as his affiliation with the party only took place in September 2009 (Duarte-Recalde 2014). The *colorado* affiliation allowed Cartes to be first a candidate and then to become president of the country for the ANR in the 2013–2018 period.

Cartes and his faction became the main opponents of Abdo, the candidate of the traditional post-Stroessner faction of the party, with particularly strong fights in Congress (López 2019b). The results of the internal party elections and the appointment of *colorado* authorities in 2022, therefore, represent a vindication and a triumph for Cartes and technocrat-business politics. This occurs paradoxically in the context of growing criticism and evidence of his involvement in corruption, theoretically constituting an adverse environment for him.

## Corruption scandals and the "significantly corrupt" candidate

The involvement of businessmen in politics is not unique to Paraguay. In Latin America, several countries have seen (center-)right leaders with ties to the business sector assume the presidency: Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Sebastián Piñera in Chile, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru, or Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador. The increasing presence of these business leaders in presidential offices has not

only led to the emergence of corporation-based parties (Barndt 2014) but has also sparked a growing discussion about the (return of) oligarchic tendencies in the region (Cameron 2021). Despite their different political fates, their overall performance has been negative, with modest economic and political results (Vergara 2020). Only a few of them, including Macri and Cartes himself, managed to maintain their political relevance.

In the Paraguayan case, oligarchic tendencies, the importance of economic resources, and corruption have been more a constant in politics (Duarte-Recalde 2015). However, with Cartes' political triumph in 2022, these aspects become particularly significant. Therefore, corruption and the "privatization" of politics become the flip side of the personalization of politics. The concentration of economic, political, party, and media power in the hands of one person, amidst corruption scandals of regional dimensions, represents the culmination of the trends in recent years. Thus, Cartes' political victory in 2022 illustrates down-rightly the problems associated with the presence of private economic resources in politics.

The events of July 2022, therefore, represent the logical outcome of these trends. While they may not be surprising, they are nonetheless striking. The United States government accused Cartes, through a press conference led by the U.S. ambassador to Paraguay, Marc Osfield,<sup>3</sup> of an "involvement in significant corruption" (ABC TV 2022). Specifically, Cartes was accused of obstructing an investigation into transnational crime during his mandate in order to protect himself (as well as his criminal associate Darío Messer) from potential prosecution and political costs. Allegedly, Cartes had ties to organizations designated as "terrorists" by the U.S. government, which renders him, as well as his children, Juan Pablo Cartes Montaña, Sofía Cartes Montaña, and María Sol Cartes Montañato, ineligible to enter the country. Presumably, his children were also directly and indirectly involved in acts of corruption according to the U.S. Department of State (Hansler 2022).<sup>4</sup>

## Insecurity and growing (narco-)violence

The growing insecurity, penetration of drug trafficking, and presence of hired assassins in different parts of the country are, apart from long-term structural socioeconomic problems, the most visible and pressing consequences of the

<sup>3</sup> The ambassador echoed the statement issued by the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken.

<sup>4</sup> Cartes was not the only one involved in the U.S. government's accusations. The Vice President of the Republic under Abdo's government, Hugo Velázquez, was also implicated. Velázquez was originally the presidential candidate for the Abdo's faction for 2023, but he withdrew from the race for the national executive after being declared as involved in acts of "significant corruption" as well. In his case, he was accused of allegedly bribing a public official in order to "obstruct an investigation that threatened the Vice President and his financial interests," resulting in his entry into the U.S. being prohibited (El País 2022). Consequently, Velázquez's departure complicated the ruling party's candidacy for the internal elections, which eventually fell to Arnoldo Wiens.

disconnection between political parties that afflict the country. These phenomena result from a party system and personalistic leadership that are indifferent to the problems and social demands of the citizens. Furthermore, some political leaders are directly or indirectly linked to organized crime or drug trafficking (Villalba & Filártiga-Callizo 2022). In this sense, this problem is related to the two previous phenomena, which gave rise to negligent political elites who seek personal benefits and focus on intra-party struggles that reflect the excessive importance individual political leaderships, exacerbated role of private economic resources (or privatized state resources), and investment in clientelistic ties with the citizens, leaving no room for programmatic priorities. While the violence linked to internal elections was much more limited than the one recorded in the 2021 municipal elections, the climate of insecurity persisted. In fact, during the final years of Abdo's government, insecurity (along with corruption) has remained one of the two most important problems in the country, both nationally and in the capital city (Foco 2021; Megacadena 2023).

Paraguay has traditionally had a weak state with low presence and state capacities across the territory, ill-prepared to confront organized crime. According to recent investigations, parts of the territory are characterized by absence of state (Giraudy & Luna 2017: 115–116), others by the presence of guerrillas such as the Paraguayan People's Army (Nickson 2019), while in some areas (e.g., Pedro Juan Caballero) there are local orders that combine elements of legality and illegality (Moriconi and Peris 2019). Furthermore, the tri-border area of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, with a central point in Ciudad del Este, is traditionally considered a smuggling hub (Montenegro 2013). As Luna (2020) argues, the country not only has comparatively porous borders but has also become one of the world's leading producers of marijuana in recent years, as well as an important hub for micro-trafficking of cocaine paste and a significant link in drug routes (particularly of cocaine) to the Atlantic coast of Latin America and Europe (Rolón Luna 2022).

In this context, between 2020 and 2022, there has been a steady increase in episodes of hired assassinations (Rolón Luna 2023), linked to illegal drug trade in the country (and Paraguay's role in cocaine trafficking in the region), which helps explain the rise in homicides in recent years (Rolón Luna 2022). Moreover, this violence, along with the low capacity for response (and, in some cases, complicity) of the state and the involvement of some (former) politicians, helps understand why insecurity has become one of the main problems in the country in the eyes of the public. The most emblematic cases and the crimes were committed in the capital, Asunción, and only reinforce these perceptions (Última Hora 2022c).

The murder Marcelo Pecci, a leading Paraguayan prosecutor, in May 2022 was the most significant and illustrative episode of this problem. Pecci was investigating some of the main cases related to drug trafficking and was in charge of "A Ultranza PY," one of the largest operations against drug trafficking and money laundering in the country (BBC Mundo 2022). Among those implicated

in the investigations of this operation was Miguel Insfrán, alias *Tío Rico*, the alleged mastermind behind the murder of the Paraguayan prosecutor (Reynoso & Gual 2023). Pecci was shot dead while on vacation on the beaches near Cartagena, Colombia. The investigation of the crime has led to several arrests in various Latin American countries (Oquendo 2023), demonstrating an operation with continental dimensions and logistics.

Two months after Pecci's murder, in July 2022, lawmakers from different political parties presented an impeachment motion against Paraguay's Attorney General, Sandra Quiñónez. The motion included 13 accusations, among which there were actions and omissions that favored Cartes and the lack of diligence in clarifying the murder of Rodrigo Quintana and the assault on the Authentic Radical Liberal Party during the early hours of April 1, following the burning of the National Congress in March 31, 2017 (Última Hora 2022d). Likewise, inefficiency and negligence in the administrative-budgetary management of the Prosecutor's Office were attributed to her, along with impunity for corruption charges of municipal and regional governments, as well as inaction or negligence by the Public Ministry (Última Hora 2022e). The latest accusations incorporated into the motion came after statements by the Director of Communications of the Prosecutor's Office, Élide Favole, who mentioned audios involving "narco-deputies", and were seen as coercion against the lawmakers at the time the impeachment motion was to be presented (Última Hora 2022f). The project did not receive the necessary votes in the Chamber of Deputies. The initiative obtained 47 votes in favor, 27 votes against, and three blank votes, while there were three absences.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the document was archived.

In this context, as we show in the following section, ideological-programmatic discussions enter (and exit) the country's public agenda discursively and instrumentally without any major reform projects in their respective areas. In the following lines, we analyze the instrumental agenda setting of conservative anti-gender issues that were used to cover up (the discussion of) corruption scandals and subsequently leveraged in ANR's internal elections and Cartes' victory.

#### IV. DIVERTING ATTENTION FROM THE "SIGNIFICANT CORRUPTION"

The public agenda of the second half of 2022 was marked by Horacio Cartes' response to the corruption scandals in which he was involved. Cartes' sector managed to introduce the anti-gender issues in the public agenda in October of that year, thereby shifting the subject of the public discussion and diverting attention from his personal scandals and legal accusations. This was facilitated

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.diputados.gov.py/index.php/noticias/fracasa-nuevo-intento-de-juicio-politico-sandra-quinonez>

by the role of the media, many of which are owned by Cartes, which disseminated fallacious and inexact information along with a fundamentalist religious discourse (Costa n.d.). Strikingly, the controversy dissipated in the weeks following the internal elections, lending support to the idea that it was more of an electoral strategy than a serious substantive discussion on these issues.

Self-proclaimed “pro-life” and “pro-family” groups organized their actions around the process of drafting the National Plan for the Transformation of Education (PNTE), arguing that it promotes the loss of parental rights, includes teaching materials unsuitable for school-age individuals, and spreads the so-called “gender ideology” (El Surti 2022). Conservative group leaders had a strong presence in radio and television media to disseminate misinformation about the PNTE, particularly in pro-Cartes media outlets (Costa n.d.), supported by nationalist rhetoric. Much of this discourse has been reproduced in their political spaces and communities by figures allied with Cartes, such as Senator Enrique Riera or Deputy “Bachi” Núñez (El Nacional 2022). These issues also became part of electoral campaigns of new figures in this sector as strategy to position themselves, with Lizarella Valiente, a Cartes-aligned candidate for the Senate and wife of the Mayor of Asunción, being a notable example (Ñandutí 2022).

The conservative groups marched in Asunción against the PNTE on October 20, 2022. Numerous local authorities supported the march, including the Municipality of Asunción, which also urged its workers to participate in the event (ABC Color 2022b). Regarding the participation of the private sector, Tabacalera del Este S.A., a company belonging to Cartes’ business conglomerate, announced through its human resources department its adherence to the declared public holiday in Alto Paraná, urging its employees to take part in the march and granting paid leave for that purpose (ABC Color 2022c).

There was also pressure from these conservative groups on national and sub-national public institutions to take a stand against this proposed educational reform. Resolution No. 63/22 of the Departmental Board of Alto Paraná established that “The Departmental Board of Alto Paraná urges the Ministry of Education and Sciences to reject the National Plan for Educational Transformation: Paraguay 2040” (Posa Guinea et al. 2022). They also questioned both the rights-based and gender approaches, leading the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MEC) to issue a memorandum reminding its supervisors and directors of the validity of an MEC resolution that prohibits educational materials with a gender focus.

In that context, during an extraordinary session on November 30, 2022, and amidst controversial statements from leading political figures,<sup>6</sup> the Chamber of Deputies approved preliminary the bill “Repealing the validity of Law 6,659/20 that approves the financing agreement between the European Union

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.diputados.gov.py/index.php/noticias/media-sancion-para-derogar-convenio-que-financia-el-programa-de-transformacion-educativa>

and the Republic of Paraguay for the Program to Support the Transformation of the Educational System in Paraguay and its Annexes”<sup>7</sup>, arguing that the European Union (EU) was financing the program and that the destruction of the traditional family was implicit in the plan. The passing of the bill was approved with 63 votes in favor of repealing the law, 1 vote against, 2 abstentions, and 14 absences (Latitud 25 2022).

Amidst this national debate, the European Union issued two official statements in early December clarifying the terms of the Financing Agreement between the EU and the Paraguayan State. The first statement emphasized that the EU does not have the power to decide the content of the curriculum in the Paraguayan public education system, as this responsibility lies with national authorities.<sup>8</sup> A week later, the second statement from the EU emphasized three points: the EU does not finance the Education Transformation Bill, it has no control over the curriculum content, and the funds allocated to the education sector are non-refundable and non-conditional.<sup>9</sup> If the repeal of Law 6,659 is approved in the Senate, it would represent a significant setback for Paraguayan education, as these resources are specifically intended to cover school lunches and ensure school supplies for at least 75,000 students (Última Hora 2022g).

In this way, there was a shift in the public discourse, diverting attention from the scandals and legal accusations against Horacio Cartes towards an agenda driven by traditionalism, nationalism, conservative interests, and religious identities. As a result, conservative groups were able to position their political agenda and exert influence over national and subnational public institutions. This debate also served the Cartes-led movement to position their sector as defenders of traditional interests, more conservative and nationalist than the Abdo’s *Añetete* faction, and it disappeared once the internal election process was over.

## V. INTERNAL ELECTIONS OF ANR CANDIDACIES AND AUTHORITIES

The internal elections for electoral candidacies in the ANR and the PLRA (and the *Concertación Nacional* formed by the Liberals) were held on Sunday, December 18. The elections included the contest for the presidential candidacy as well as for 45 seats in the Senate with their 30 alternates, 80 positions for deputies, 17 governors, and 257 departmental councilors. Simultaneously, the elections

<sup>7</sup> The original law can be found here: <https://www.bacn.gov.py/leyes-paraguayas/9453/ley-n-6659-aprueba-el-convenio-de-financiacion-entre-la-union-europea-y-the-republic-of-paraguay-for-the-program-to-support-the-transformation-of-the-educational-system-in-paraguay-and-its-annexes>. The bill that seeks to repeal it is available here: <http://silpy.congreso.gov.py/expediente/127085>.

<sup>8</sup> See: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/paraguay/comunicado-apoyo-de-la-uni%C3%B3n-europea-al-sector-de-la-educaci%C3%B3n-en-paraguay\\_es?s=193](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/paraguay/comunicado-apoyo-de-la-uni%C3%B3n-europea-al-sector-de-la-educaci%C3%B3n-en-paraguay_es?s=193)

<sup>9</sup> See: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/paraguay/comunicado-ii-cooperaci%C3%B3n-entre-la-uni%C3%B3n-europea-y-paraguay-en-materia\\_es?s=193](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/paraguay/comunicado-ii-cooperaci%C3%B3n-entre-la-uni%C3%B3n-europea-y-paraguay-en-materia_es?s=193)

of ANR party authorities' took place. The results of both contests within ANR once again positioned Cartes as the big winner. In the ANR internal elections, Peña became the official presidential candidate of the party, and Cartes himself won the party's presidency. Therefore, HC came to dominate the national leadership of the party.

The elections were preceded by a fire in the TJSE warehouses, which produced the destruction of more than 7,500 electronic voting machines (Última Hora 2022h). Despite this, the elections proceeded without major problems, using the machines that could be rescued, limiting the number of ballot boxes per polling station, and extending the voting hours. Likewise, the December 2022 electoral events were also calmer compared to the previous year's municipal elections, as there were almost no incidents at the polling stations or violence related to the electoral candidates.

The ANR internal elections encompassed all the previously mentioned posts, whereas the *Concertación Nacional* (CN),<sup>10</sup> consisting of 23 parties and two movements,<sup>11</sup> only selected the presidential formula in joint elections. The rest of the positions were decided in internal elections within each party by their members. Additionally, ANR used the party members register, while the CN's candidacies were voted using the national electoral register (based on the Permanent Civic Register), allowing any eligible citizen to vote (as long as they had not voted in ANR's internal elections).<sup>12</sup> In general terms, the ANR elections were much more competitive, while in the CN (for the presidential posts), the PLRA's official candidate clearly dominated.

The ANR internal elections for the presidential formula confronted two main candidacies. Santiago Peña, an economist and former Minister of Finance during Cartes' government, was running for the second time and was accompanied on the ballot by Pedro Alliama, then president of the governing party, as the vice-president representing the HC sector. Arnoldo Wiens and Juan Manuel Brunetti<sup>13</sup> were also candidates for president and vice-president, respectively, representing Abdo's incumbent movement *Fuerza Republicana*. Peña and Alliama prevailed with a clear difference of almost 100,000 votes (Table III), confirming the dominance of the Cartes' faction in the selection of the presidential candidacy.

<sup>10</sup> The figure of the "concertación" is relatively new (introduced in electoral legislation in the late 2000s) and it was not utilized by the coalition that brought Lugo to power in 2008 (the figure of "alliance" was used instead). Unlike the latter, the "concertación" implies parties' collaboration in the government administration and management, as opposed to the former that represents a mere electoral agreement.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from PLRA, CN included political parties such as *Partido Revolucionario Febrerista*, *Partido Encuentro Nacional*, or *Partido Patria Querida*, among others. See Cáceres (2022) for more details.

<sup>12</sup> The use of the open register sparked animosity within the ANR, and the party ended up taking the matter to court. However, the Electoral Tribunal (TSJE) endorsed the possibility of using the open register and allowed the internal elections to proceed in this manner. The decision was ultimately not appealed with the Supreme Court.

<sup>13</sup> Wiens was a national Senator, a former Minister of Public Works and Communications and an evangelical pastor. Brunetti was Minister of Information and Communication Technologies and Minister of Education.

Table III: Results of the ANR internal elections

	Presidency	Senate	Chamber of Deputies <sup>1</sup>	Governorates <sup>1</sup>
Honor Colorado (Peña-Alliana)	618,651 (51.60%)	559,918 (46.68%)	9	7
Fuerza Republicana (Wiens-Brunetti)	526,061 (43.87%)	543,474 (45.31%)	9	11

Source: Prepared by the authors using data from the Transmission of Preliminary Electoral Results (TREP) of the TSJE.

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Only the results of the two most-voted factions by department (including the capital) are presented.

The victory of Cartes' faction in the presidential candidacy contest was largely due to the mobilization of the *colorado* electorate and the focus on education system reform. In this way, it appears that not only did the declarations of the US authorities had no significant effect on participation and results, but that the Cartes faction also managed to mobilize larger groups of voters due to the public discussion on moral issues. In fact, the participation in the ANR internal elections reached nearly 1.15 million people, almost 150,000 more than in the previous internal elections.

The appeal to these issues, deliberately promoted by the Cartes' sector in public opinion to overshadow corruption scandals, was part of a segmentation strategy of the voters (Luna 2014): 1) the presence of Peña showed a technocratic commitment aimed at the country's elites; 2) the discussion of the conservative anti-gender agenda in education appealed to the traditional party values and the typical ANR *militante* voters, which likely allowed the Cartes faction to gain support from part of the traditionalist *colorado* electorate that, theoretically, should support the Abdista officialism; 3) the economic resources enabled clientelist appeals to less affluent militants, resorting mainly to buying electoral participation, a traditional practice in the country.

Regarding the rest of electoral positions on the ballots, the HC faction did not have as much success. Among the candidates for Senate, the person with the highest number of preferential votes who ended up leading the *colorado* list in the upper chamber was Silvio Ovelar, currently linked to the Cartes faction. However, in terms of the Chamber of Deputies' candidacies, HC received the most votes in half of the departments, and in terms of governors, Abdo's *Fuerza Republicana* was able to win 11 candidacies while *Honor Colorado* received only seven. Therefore, in the competition for subnational posts, the particular logics of the respective territories take on greater prominence, and the results tend to be less contested. As expected, immediately after the election day, both Cartes and Peña called for the unity of the *colorado* forces in support of the officialist candidacies for April 2023. Thus, at least discursively, the path towards the traditional "*abrazo republicano*" opened up, with the defeated officialist candidate, Arnoldo Wiens, stating: "From now on, we are all *Lista 1*" in reference to ANR (ABC Color 2022d). This gesture was endorsed in early January 2023 in

a meeting between both contenders and in a joint statement in support of the *colorado* candidates.

The internal elections in the main opposition party, the PLRA, followed two different paths. On the one hand, the presidential candidacy was decided within *Concertación Nacional*, using unprecedentedly the national voters register. On the other hand, for the other ballot positions at stake, the party held internal elections among its members. In general terms, the sector led by Efraín Alegre dominated both the competitions within the *Concertación* and the PLRA internal elections where they took place.

Alegre, president of the PLRA since 2016, former senator, and former minister in the Lugo's government, comfortably won the internal elections of the *Concertación*. With almost 350,000 votes and in tandem with Soledad Núñez, former Minister of the National Secretariat for Housing and Habitat during the government of Horacio Cartes, Alegre won by a difference of nearly a quarter million votes over Hugo Fleitas and Bruno Balmelli, who were supported by the sector of Blas Llano, Alegre's main opponent within the PLRA, and the candidacy of Martín Burt and Luz Borja, who finished third (Table IV). The defeated candidates acknowledged Alegre's victory and his designation as the official candidate of the CN for the April 2023 elections.

Table IV: Results of the National Concertation internal elections

	Presidency
FIL por la Patria Más Encuentro (Alegre-Núñez)	348,873 (59.28%)
Movimiento del Nuevo País (Fleitas-Balmelli)	100,325 (17.05%)
De la Victoria (Burt-Borja)	74,471 (12.65%)

Source: Prepared by the authors using data from the Transmission of Preliminary Electoral Results (TREP) of the TSJE.

Notes: Only the results of the three candidates with the most votes out of the six total are presented.

Despite the fact that the *Concertación* took advantage of the national register and expected massive participation from voters of all the parties participating in the CN, from the "honorable *colorados*" (*colorados de bien*), and from the general electorate not affiliated with any political organization, the levels of participation showed little difference compared to the 2017 PLRA internal election, in which Alegre became the party's presidential candidate with nearly 310,000 votes. The 2022 turnout exceeded the participation from the 2017 PLRA internal election by only 134,000 votes (Carrizosa 2017). These results showed that there was no significant increase in turnout around the PLRA presidential candidacy, even with their multi-party platform and broad selection.

As for the other candidacies at stake, the CN parties opted for different strategies, and most of the contests took place between their respective internal factions and lists, depending on the agreements in each department of the country.

Among the liberal lists, the most important one was the Alegre-led *Frente de Integración Liberal* (FIL) in the Senate, led by Salyn Buzarquis.<sup>14</sup> The results for the Chamber of Deputies showed similar patterns (ABC Color 2022e).

In the opposition outside of the ANR and the *Concertación*, Euclides Acevedo emerged as a presidential candidate. A former Interior Minister and more recently the Foreign Minister in the Abdo's government, he leads the political movement *La Nueva República*. Acevedo formed a presidential candidacy with Jorge Querey, Fernando Lugo's personal physician and senator for Frente Guasu (2018–2023). Despite internal differences within the Frente Guasu (FG), FG prioritized choosing its own legislative lists for Congress and the governorships, forming the *Alianza Frente Guasu-Ñemongeta*. This alliance was made up of 11 political parties and social and political movements and held their primaries also on December 18. The elections served to legitimize the previously agreed-upon candidacies through delegate congresses and the order of the candidates in the lists. Fernando Lugo, a senator and former president (2008-2012), was first on the list for the Senate.<sup>15</sup>

The ANR also held elections for President of the Party's Governing Board (and its members) on the same day as the selection of electoral candidates. On that occasion, Cartes prevailed over then-President Abdo with a total of 605,917 votes against 457,302 votes (Table V), a margin even larger than the difference between Peña and Wiens. Therefore, Cartes became the party's president for the next eight years, succeeding *cartista* Deputy Pedro Alliana, who accompanied Peña on the presidential ticket. Despite being declared as involved in "significant corruption" by US authorities five months before the electoral process, Cartes (and his HC faction) ended up confirming their dominance within the ANR, controlling the party, the presidential candidates, and the leadership of the senatorial list.

Table V: Elections results of the ANR party authorities

	President	Members of the Governing Board
Honor Colorado (Cartes)	605,917 (50.56%)	564,499 (47.08%)
Fuerza Republicana (Abdo)	457,302 (38.16%)	536,822 (44.77%)

Source: Prepared by the authors using data from the Transmission of Preliminary Electoral Results (TREP) of the TSJE.

Notes: Only the results of the two factions with the most votes are presented.

<sup>14</sup> The PLRA internal elections were not exempt from controversy. Some of the party leaders, such as Eduardo Nakayama, former candidate for the mayorship of Asunción in 2021 and pre-candidate for the Senate, claimed that there was an alleged "electoral fraud" and requested the Independent Electoral Tribunal of the PLRA to invalidate the elections (ABC Color 2022f).

<sup>15</sup> Lugo suffered a cerebrovascular accident in August 2022, and his presence in the internal elections was very limited.

Internal elections are considered the most expensive in Paraguay, given that voting is not mandatory and it requires mobilizing voters to a greater extent (Abente 2022; Dosek 2023). Therefore, the role of political financing is even more evident than in general elections. Not only do a significant percentage of voters acknowledge being offered incentives in exchange for their vote and/or being taken to polling places (Lachi & Rojas Scheffer 2018), but data from the Americas Barometer (LAPOP) also show some concerning trends regarding the popular perception of electoral processes in the country. There is very low trust in elections, with two-thirds thinking that the wealthy buy elections and 30-40% of people believing that votes are not counted correctly and that politicians can find out how they voted (Lupu et al., 2021). Therefore, the integrity of elections suffers significant problems, and the context of increasing violence in the country foreshadows a complex outlook for 2023.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Paraguay presents a strange combination of strong political parties and highly personalized politics. Amidst growing corruption scandals, the main events of 2022 had the former President Horacio Cartes as a main protagonist. Cartes became the formal leader of ANR and his *protégé* became the official party candidate for the presidency in 2023. Despite being accused of “involvement in significant corruption” and facing financial sanctions from the US government, Cartes managed to redirect the public debate in the second half of 2022 and gained political ground, strengthening his leadership in Paraguayan politics and within the ANR in particular. The economic and legal consequences are yet to be seen. By the end of 2022, the most significant issue for the ANR seemed to be the inability of Cartes and the party to access credit to finance the campaign leading up to the 2023 general elections.

While the Paraguayan case may be extreme, it can offer some lessons and insights to other countries in the region. The two main trends—the increasing personalization of politics and the rise of insecurity and penetration of organized crime (in politics)—are common to some of its Latin American counterparts, and in Paraguay, they are a consequence of an ossified party system that fails to address the country’s structural problems but maintains stability through clientelistic relationships and socially anchored parties. The resulting politics tend to be elitist, oligarchic, disconnected from the needs of the people, influenced by (illegal) money in politics, and with a state that has been weakened and co-opted by politicians with ties to informal and illegal interests. These political dynamics are held together by persistent clientelistic structures within a political system that suffers from democratic eroding. The upcoming years envision a challenging outlook for Paraguay, especially if the lack of attention to structural problems and false solutions persist.

From a comparative perspective, the political situation in Paraguay could converge, paradoxically and despite contextual differences, with that of Peru (Do-

sek 2019; Abente 2022). Both the absence of minimally structured and stable parties, with amateur politicians within a volatile and uprooted party system like the Peruvian (Vergara and Augusto 2022), and the existence of ossified parties (Rosenblatt 2021) with highly conflictive internal factions and clientelistic territorial structures within an over-institutionalized party system (Schedler 1995) like the Paraguayan, can lead to similar problems: deterioration of the quality of democracy, concentration of power in a few hands and oligarchic tendencies, lack of programmatic linkages with citizens, corruption and judicial impunity, or increased presence of illegal actors and financing in politics. Therefore, political elites in the region should take note and avoid these two (opposite) extremes of dysfunctional parties, which might yield similarly damaging outcomes. Democracy requires stable party systems with capacity to adapt and parties that aggregate interests vertically (in a programmatic manner) and coordinate politicians horizontally (Piñeiro Rodríguez and Rosenblatt 2020; Luna et al. 2022).

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