

@CHAPTER = PARAGUAY

General Alfredo Stroessner was overthrown on February 3, 1989, in a violent coup that abruptly ended his 34-year rule. He was replaced by General Andrés Rodríguez. It is notable that in Paraguay, a long-time U.S. ally governed until the coup by a right-wing dictatorship, the Reagan administration had a strong record of criticizing Stroessner's abysmal human rights practices. In 1989, a year that saw a dramatic improvement in the human rights situation in Paraguay, the Bush administration showed continued interest in human rights in that country.

Gen. Rodríguez launched his government with an inaugural speech pledging to restore human rights and democracy. He stated, "I believe that for human rights to be a reality and not simply wishful thinking, an authentic democracy must exist -- not just a facade or simply laws -- in which a strong and independent judiciary exists, in which the right to express opinions is respected, as is the right to organize peacefully, so that all Paraguayans have the same opportunities, without privileges of any kind." Rodríguez promptly announced that elections would be held on May 1, and then was easily elected president.

The Bush administration deserves credit for pressing Rodríguez from the start to respect human rights. On the day of the coup, a Bush administration official told Reuters, "We are watching it carefully and note that General Rodríguez has indicated a desire to move toward democracy. We hope he carries through." State Department spokesman Charles Redman said, "We would welcome any genuine movement toward a more democratic form of government in that country." A week later, when the U.S. recognized the Rodríguez government, U.S. Ambassador Timothy Towell said, according to *The Washington Post*, that the quality of the U.S. relationship with the new government would depend on the degree to which it moved forward in opening the political system, guaranteeing human rights and fighting drug trafficking."

Within weeks, Paraguay was transformed from one of the more repressive countries in Latin America to a much more open society preparing busily for its first free and relatively fair elections in decades. The Rodríguez government began to respect freedom of association and assembly and legalized opposition political parties that had never been formally recognized -- with the exception of the Communist Party. Prominent opposition leaders began to campaign for the presidency. When press freedom was announced, news organizations that had been banned, such as *ABC Color*, Radio Nandutí and Radio Caritas, resumed operations. Laws applied in political cases were repealed. The last remaining political prisoners were released. Many Paraguayans returned from exile.

The Rodríguez government was criticized in Paraguay for its rush to organize elections in only 90 days. The opposition had little time to recover from three decades of repression. Election authorities were appointed in accordance with the parties' results in previous highly restricted and fraudulent elections, which also gave an unusual advantage to the Colorado Party. And there were also credible allegations of some irregularities and fraud on election day. Despite these problems, the May 1 voting took place in a climate free of fear and violence and the elections were widely accepted as a success both within and outside Paraguay. It was generally agreed that any fraud that may have taken place would not have affected the outcome. Opposition figures, including long-time human rights activists, won a significant number of seats in the Congress. The Bush administration provided the indelible ink used to mark the voters' fingers to prevent repeat voting, but made no comment on the irregularities that emerged. President Bush congratulated Rodríguez on his victory, saying that he was "happy with the elections held on May 1 as a first sign of hope."

Free elections, of course, do not by themselves guarantee respect for human rights, and Paraguay is still in a period of transition in addressing violations. The violent evictions of peasants who occupy lands in the countryside and other abuses that arise from land conflicts persist. The judiciary continues to be slow and inefficient -- perhaps deliberately -- at a time when victims of human rights abuses at the hands of the military and police are for the first time able to seek justice in the courts and when former Stroessner officials are being prosecuted for crimes of corruption. There has been no pardon or amnesty for past abuses, but it is clear that the Rodríguez government is not interested in promoting a full airing of the facts or punishing those responsible. The victims then are left to their own devices in mobilizing the courts, and so far the judiciary has been slow and unresponsive. Human rights organizations have started campaigns against impunity.

As in other countries, the Bush administration has remained silent on the question of redress for past abuses, as well as on the matter of violent rural evictions. We believe that the administration could make a significant contribution to promoting accountability for past abuses by stating clearly its support for restoring truth and justice by means of the judicial process. Likewise, the Bush administration should use the leverage it now has, by virtue of its friendly relations with Rodríguez and the previous administration's principled stand in Stroessner's last years, to express concern about rural violence against the poor.