

The "people's army" under siege

The leftist president battles an insurgency.

FEW Latin American presidents would seem less likely to confront a guerrilla uprising than Paraguay's Fernando Lugo. A former Catholic bishop, Mr Lugo rose to prominence as a liberation theologian and advocate for land reform. His election in 2008 broke the Colorado Party's 61-year hold on power, cementing the country's shift to democracy. Yet after a series of provocative attacks by the tiny Paraguayan People's Army (EPP), Mr Lugo is now in a similar position to the region's right-wing leaders of yesteryear.



Founded in 2001, the EPP is thought to have a mere 20 armed members, and has been behind only a few crimes. But these have been shocking: in 2004 it kidnapped and murdered Cecilia Cubas, the daughter of a former president. Officials say it has ties to Colombia's FARC. It is reportedly sheltered by peasant groups, drug traffickers and corrupt police.

The EPP has been a big headache for Mr Lugo. Last year the group kidnapped Fidel Zavala, a well-known rancher, for 94 days, and released him only once a ransom was paid. In April an EPP member killed a police officer and three ranch workers. The opposition has criticised the president for being soft on the guerrillas, claiming that he once knew some of their leaders through the church.

In response to these attacks, the president asked Congress to grant him emergency powers, which it did on April 24th. The law, valid in five departments for 30 days, authorises arrests without a warrant and allows the army to join the police in security operations. Mr Lugo promptly sent 1,000 extra troops to the region, bringing the total to 3,000.

The crackdown has had mixed results so far. The government boasts of the capture of Jesús Ortiz, allegedly an EPP logistics co-ordinator, on May 6th. However, he was arrested outside the area subject to the measures.

Meanwhile, the military deployment has been a fiasco. One group of soldiers accidentally started a firefight with police officers by raiding their headquarters. Another angered residents by barging in on a girl's 15th-birthday party. Human-rights groups say they have received reports that the army is extracting fake fines from civilians and making arrests unrelated to the EPP.

Despite these setbacks, Mr Lugo wants Congress to make permanent the provision allowing the army to accompany police. For now, the fight remains popular, both with wealthy farmers and with peasants who fear the guerrillas' wrath. But public opinion may sour if the government fails to eliminate the EPP.

To do so it will have to strengthen the state's presence in the countryside, improve co-ordination between the police and the army and modernise the courts. Diego Zavala, Fidel Zavala's brother, says he has not testified against the group because Paraguay lacks a witness-protection programme. "My family and I are constantly threatened by the EPP," he says, "and we live in fear."

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