https://latinoamerica21.com/en/categoria/autocracia-en/

2 July, 2026

Autocracy

Paraguay: When a leader becomes bigger than his party

The growing concentration of power around Horacio Cartes has reignited the debate over the independence of Paraguay's institutions and the need to renew the country's political leadership.

Steven E. Hendrix

The recent controversies surrounding the Supreme Court's ruling rejecting the constitutional challenge filed by former senator Kattya González have once again brought an uncomfortable question to the forefront in Paraguay: to what extent are the country's main state institutions perceived as independent from the real centers of political power?

The issue is not legal. It is political. Regardless of the merits of the ruling, much of the public debate has focused less on the justices' reasoning than on a broader question: who really exercises power in Paraguay?

That perception matters. In a democracy, trust in institutions depends not only on their actual independence, but also on their perceived independence. When large segments of the public begin to interpret that decisions made by supposedly autonomous bodies have been influenced by a political leader, a problem arises that goes far beyond any particular ruling.

It is no coincidence that the 1992 Constitution defines Paraguay as a social state governed by the rule of law, organized under the principles of representative, participatory, and pluralistic democracy. The Constitution’s logic is institutional. Power belongs to the Republic, not to any one individual. Political parties are instruments of democracy, not substitutes for it.

That problem in Paraguay stems from the excessive concentration of political leadership.

For more than a decade, Horacio Cartes has been the dominant figure within the Colorado Party. After leaving the presidency in 2018, he did not retire from politics. On the contrary, he consolidated his influence until becoming the principal center of gravity within the governing party. His supporters argue that this continuity has preserved internal unity, prevented divisions, and secured electoral victories.

They are not without reason. The Colorado Party's recent electoral results demonstrate a disciplined and effective political machine.

However, political history shows that a movement's greatest strength can, over time, become its greatest weakness.

Political parties need strong leadership. But they also need renewal. They need mechanisms that allow the emergence of new figures, new ideas, and new generations of leaders. When leadership remains concentrated in a single individual for too long, even within democratic structures, incentives begin to change. Loyalty becomes more valuable than innovation. Proximity to the leader carries greater weight than building one's own legitimacy.

Gradually, the party stops producing successors and begins producing administrators.

The problem is not unique to Paraguay. Latin America is full of examples of political movements that achieved great success under charismatic leadership but encountered enormous difficulties when the time for transition arrived. In some cases, the lack of renewal led to internal divisions. In others, it resulted in prolonged periods of stagnation. In almost all of them, it weakened the capacity of political institutions to adapt.

Paraguay now faces that risk.

The challenge does not lie solely in the figure of Cartes. The problem runs deeper. It is about the growing difficulty of distinguishing between party, leadership, and institutions. When those boundaries begin to blur, politics loses its capacity for renewal and institutions lose their ability to generate public trust.

An international dimension further compounds the situation and cannot be ignored. In 2022, the U.S. Department of State publicly designated Cartes for his alleged involvement in significant corruption. In 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed financial sanctions against him under the Global Magnitsky regime. Although those sanctions were subsequently lifted in 2025, the episode left a lasting mark on the former president’s international reputation and, by extension, on Paraguay’s image abroad.

The question is not whether Washington was right or wrong. Nor is it whether the sanctions should have remained in place or been lifted. The relevant point is different. Markets, investors, and international actors observe institutions just as closely as they observe individuals. When a political figure accumulates an extraordinary level of influence while simultaneously becoming the subject of high-profile international controversies, the reputational cost extends beyond the individual.

Paraguay needs investment. It needs confidence. It needs to strengthen its international standing at a time of growing regional competition for capital, trade, and opportunities. None of those objectives is served by the perception of an excessive concentration of power.

Learning from the past

The democratic transition following the regime of Alfredo Stroessner sought precisely to build institutions capable of limiting the concentration of power and ensuring that no individual stood above the rules of the Republic. The 1992 Constitution was, in many respects, the legal expression of that national aspiration. Its purpose was not simply to replace one ruler with another, but to strengthen a system in which institutions mattered more than individuals.

That concern is not new in Paraguayan history. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Cecilio Báez warned of the danger posed by those who, “by usurping the inalienable rights of the people, may rise to power at the expense of the great purposes of the institution of democratic government.” His observation remains relevant because it points to a permanent truth of every republic: institutions exist to limit power, not to concentrate it.

Decades later, Augusto Roa Bastos explored a similar concern in *I, the Supreme*. The novel revolves around a question that has accompanied Paraguay for generations:

what happens when political power becomes too closely identified with a single individual and institutions begin to merge with the will of the leader? Although written in a different historical context, the question remains profoundly relevant for any modern democracy.

Of course, political leaders are under no obligation to step aside simply because their critics wish them to do so. In a democracy, political longevity depends on public support and institutional rules. But precisely for that reason, the responsibility for promoting renewal also falls on those who occupy positions of leadership. Great leaders are remembered not only for the victories they achieved. They are also remembered for the institutions they left behind.

The challenge Paraguay faces today is neither that of a dictatorship nor of an institutional crisis comparable to those of its past. It is a more subtle challenge. It consists of ensuring that the strength of its political parties, its courts, and its republican institutions does not become excessively dependent on a single individual, no matter how influential or successful that person may be.

The true test of a political party’s strength is not its ability to win elections under a dominant leader, but its ability to remain relevant once that leader is no longer there.

The Colorado Party has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for survival throughout its history. The question it now faces is more complex: whether it also possesses the ability to renew itself before dependence on a single figure ultimately limits its own future.

Steven E. Hendrix

Otros artículos del autor

Alawyer and former high-ranking U.S. government official with decades of experience in Latin America. He was a senior advisor for South America at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).