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PARAGUAY

Paraguayans to pick leader after nasty race

■ The front-runners in Paraguay's presidential race are Horacio Cartes of the Colorado Party and Efraín Alegre of the ruling Liberal Party.

BY ED STOCKER
Special to The Miami Herald

ASUNCION, Paraguay — Paraguayans head to the polls Sunday to choose a new president after a venomously fought campaign marred by slander and backstabbing.

Front-runners Horacio Cartes, 56, of the Colorado Party, and Efraín Alegre, 50, of the ruling Liberal Party, both accuse each other of corruption.

The vote will be the first since the controversial ousting of leftist President Fernando Lugo last June, largely over his handling of deadly clashes over land rights. Lugo's impeachment resulted in diplomatic sanctions against Paraguay for what many regional leaders called a "parliamentary coup."

The Colorado candidate, one of the richest men in the country and owner of 25 companies, has been accused of everything from trafficking in drugs and contraband cigarettes to money laundering — charges his party has denied.

Although Cartes' lead has narrowed over the last few days, the most recent survey from IPA pollsters gave the businessman 47.6 percent of the vote, with Alegre trailing at 32.5 percent.

The Liberal candidate has been accused of collecting campaign funds from local businessmen on a recent trip to Uruguay, where he also met President José Mujica. Alegre is also embroiled in a scandal involving a land purchase that has caused one head to roll.

Parliamentary President Jorge Oviedo Matto resigned earlier in the week after it was revealed that the Liberal government bought land owned by his father days before forming an alliance with the National Union of Ethical Citizens, the party of his father. Commentators and opponents have called the purchase a



PHOTOS BY JORGE SAENZ/AP

TOP CONTENDERS: Liberal Party's Efraín Alegre, above, and Colorado Party's Horacio Cartes, accuse each other of corruption.



cynical move to secure the pact and help narrow the gap with the Colorados.

But it is Cartes' comments in the past few weeks that have grabbed the headlines.

His strong defense of the "traditional" Paraguayan family, comparison of gay people to "monkeys" and comment that he'd "shoot himself in the balls" if he were to find out that his son were living with another man has riled the LGBT community.

As the candidates closed their campaigns Thursday night, the capital was filled with the noise of exploding fireworks and blaring cars horns.

In clear reference to his opponent, Alegre, speaking near the presidential palace, said that "the people know where the mafia is and where the decent Paraguay is."

The Colorado leader, meanwhile, struck a more conciliatory note at his rally

in the city of Presidente Franco, saying, "The people want solutions and not hatred."

In the colonial center of Asunción, opinions were divided.

Beto Gonzalez, 34, a taxi driver, said he didn't know which candidate would get his vote but added that the "Colorado party corruption is enormous."

Another man, who declined to give his name, said that the candidate "more capable of fraud" would win Sunday's vote.

The Colorado Party, which held power for 60 years until Lugo broke its lock on power, remains a colossal machine — and a popular one — with nearly two million card-carrying members in a country of 3.5 million eligible voters.

Cirilo Melgarejo, 43, said that he intended to vote for Cartes. "He gives lots of work to people with his companies such as Pulp [a beverage firm] and he has decent projects," he said. "I have confidence in him and the party, which is very united."

Cartes' campaign has centered on his pro-business track record and his success with ventures that range from the tobacco industry to meat production. He's also the president of Libertad, one of the most popular soccer teams in the country.

But the accusations against him have continued to swirl, despite his efforts to focus on key problems such as health, education and, above all, poverty in a country where about a third of the population is considered poor.

Wikileaks cables from the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires in 2010 suggest that Cartes was the head of a gang operating out of the Triple Frontier, a lawless area bordering Argentina and Brazil, and was involved in drug trafficking and money laundering. Back in February 2000, a small plane was intercepted on one of his farms containing cocaine and marijuana.

The businessman also has been investigated for tax evasion and contraband cigarettes that have flooded into the Brazilian market.

Cartes declined a request for an interview with The Miami Herald, but Julio Velázquez, a Colorado senator standing for reelection, responded to the allegations from party headquarters.

"When it comes to drug trafficking, Horacio has made it very clear what his position is," he said. "There's no concrete allegation against him. Horacio also has significant investments in the U.S. Do you think the Americans would allow a narco to bring money into their country?"

After the high of 2008 when Lugo won election on a promise to reform the country and its land rights issues, the ex-president's new coalition, Frente Guasú, is trailing in fourth place. Lugo, barred from standing for president again, is running for the Senate.

Chiqui Ávalos, author of *The Other Side of HC* — a recent book about Cartes, compared the Colorados to the PRI in Mexico and the powerful grip both parties continue to hold.

"Lugo's government was not what people had hoped for," he said. "He eliminated the hope for change and lots of people who voted for him [in 2008] have returned to the Colorado Party."

For Ávalos, Cartes represents conservative big business and corruption, which landlocked and impoverished Paraguay has struggled to throw off throughout its history.

"If Cartes wins," he said, "it will be a return to the past."

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