Paraguay to the Polls

It's a Dictatorship, but Few Seem
To Care Enough to Stay and Fight

AUSCUNION, PARAGUAY—Gen. Alfredo Stroessner is often called "the last dictator in South America." Since his more or less tolerated little Paraguay under his official state of siege, which he extends every day in a regularity that is, for all practical purposes, automatic. Though there is mounting speculation about when Stroessner will use the way of Peum, Retiata, Trujillo, Vargas, and other Latin America dictators, there have been no serious attempts to unseat him.

Most United States opinion is firmly opposed to the regime. But here in Paraguay, the issues are not so clear-cut, and the United States concept of democracy may be slightly premature for this country. Getting rid of a dictator is one thing and replacing him is quite another. The question of Stroessner has to be seen in the context of alternatives, and for Paraguay "What next?" may not be much better than "What now?"

Paraguayans, Plaqued "election" on Feb. 10, but no one here is paying much attention to it. The summer heat is so oppressive that even to write seems hardly worth the effort. The pen moves slowly along the一行一行空白的, clipped prose on the notebook even in the shade.

Because of the boiling heat, the only safe places for the press are the inside of a dark, open-front cafe. Outside in the streets, the heat and the Bar Independence—half-breed Indians sprawl lazily on benches, and from somewhere across town the clang of a bell signals the start of an ancient toon. Soon the crowd heaves with another "presenting" of its rails on Calle Palma, a red relic that looks like something out of Baltimore in the 1920s.

Smell of Fish on the Breezine

The trolley is the only thing moving.

Advancing heat, and the sun baking a shining path to adjust the newspaper covering his face. A 16-year-old boy pales barefoot into the bar selling contraband Cuban cigars.

A warm breeze drifts in from the Paraguay River, bringing a smell of rain and running the leaves red-bloomed over the sides of the plaza.

Asuncion is an O. Henry kind of place. Though it's the nation's capital, it seems more like some unknown city in Brazil. It is about as lively as Atlanta, and nearly as isolated. There is poverty, but not much. President Stroessner dot the downtown walls: "Justice for All, with Alfredo Stroessner.

The president already is campaigning for a third term. Whether he is doing it anyway, because he insists he is not a dictator and he can't understand why North American newspapers keep saying he is, Stroessner broods over this: somebody up there is trying to queer his image, he thinks, and it makes him bitter.

He has other suspicions, too. Last year he says, he was promised nearly $2,000,000 under the Alliance for Progress, but he has not yet received the money. The pro-Stroessner newspaper in Asuncion says the Kennedy Administration is trying to put pressure on El Presidente. "We backed the United States on Cuba," they say, "but Paraguay still hasn't received a single dollar under the Alliance."

One United States officials on the other hand, says that "the United States would like to see a broadening of political participation in this country."

Election Means Little

The coming election, though, will not change anything. El Presidente is sure to win Easily, although he is allowing token opposition. The Revolutionary Directorate, which is a bit of a misnomer. His only real opposition isn't allowed to wage a campaign. Even so, most observers say Stroessner in this election will win without difficulty, even in a free election. The only reason he doesn't hold one, they say, is that he doesn't want "ele elements" coming back to the door.

The Trouble With Rebellion

Observers are nearly unanimous that a successful rebellion against Stroessner would result in a chaotic scramble for power from which nothing but trouble would emerge. "You have to realize," says one American, "what political philosophy is not a major factor in politics here—the main things are leaders, personalities, and power."

Stroessner has never gone in heavily for philosophy. With the army on his side, he doesn't need it. Yet it does make much sense for him to claim he isn't a dictator. He is, but not even in the same league with people like Batista and Trujillo. "What you hear here," says one diplomat, "is an old-fashioned, strongman government that fairly well characterizes Paraguay's stage of social and economic development."

That's an agricultural-pastoral society, with no real organized labor or urban masses, and its institutions have not been subjected to those pressures that cause change. You'll get political change here when social and economic developments come along to force that change.

Rattling along its rails, a trolley was practically all that was stirring in Asuncion, Paraguay's capital, an O. Henry kind of place.

In Asuncion, and the rest are spread out in small towns and farming villages. Obviously, any country with a third of its population living outside the borders would appear to have a few problems but, Stroessner is the only one of them. Though both Buenos Aires and Montevideo have large colonies of middle-class Paraguayans plotting against the dictator, many informed persons wonder what these "exiles" would do if the dictator fell.

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