

Protests in Paraguay show that “people are overwhelmed, tired”, says opposition leader Leo Rubin

Via [La Diaria Politica](#)

“Demonstrations are rare in Paraguay. It is a very peaceful country. That’s why the three straight days of protests that began on Friday are almost a record,” Guasú Front leader Leo Rubin told the daily. “It was a lot of people who have taken the streets in a peaceful way. I have friends who don’t usually participate in mobilizations, people who don’t even usually protest on Twitter, and this time they took to the streets. People are overwhelmed, tired”, he explained.

The unrest has been dragging along a year of pandemic, with scandals of irregularities in the purchases of medicines and health supplies, and a growing economic crisis, explained the leader. Rubin, who is also a journalist, was a candidate for vice president in 2018, in the formula that came second in votes, led by Efraín Alegre and arising from an alliance between the Guasú Front, to which he belongs, and the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA).

What fueled the protests that began on Friday and continued on Monday was the shortage of medicines and supplies in public hospitals, which added to the lack of vaccines against the coronavirus in the country. So far Paraguay has received only 4,000 doses, a number which for Rubin is “a joke” for a population of seven million inhabitants, and has accessed another 20,000 doses donated by Chile.

To calm the discontent of the demonstrators, who are demanding his resignation, President Mario Abdo Benítez appointed a new

Minister of Health, Julio Borba, to replace Julio Mazzoleni. The departure of the former minister had been demanded by health personnel, particularly the nurses' union, and by relatives of patients with covid-19. The protests of these sectors were later accompanied by a crowd.

In the last few days demonstrations concentrated at the house of former president Horacio Cartes, leader of a sector of the ruling Colorado Party which bears his initials, Honor Colorado, to demand that he not keep President Abdo in power. The current political crisis "is a repetition of what happened in 2019, when Abdo faced an impeachment trial that was stopped by Horacio Cartes", Rubín explained to the daily. "Also now the opposition is asking for impeachment, and it will probably be presented next week in Parliament, but it is not going to have enough votes to pass it: the votes of Cartes' sector are necessary", he explained. PLRA deputies announced that they will present the initiative in the next few days.

According to what Rubín explained to the newspaper, "what Cartes is doing now is asking for the head of some ministers", and since 2019, Abdo "is a hostage" of the former president and businessman. According to his reading, Cartes seeks "to wear down Abdo as much as possible until 2023 to become the savior of the Colorado Party and present a leader chosen by him, probably Santiago Peña, as a candidate for president". Several political actors are linking Cartes to the cabinet changes arranged by Abdo.

Late changes

"In Paraguay a clientelist practice of the Colorado Party is installed", said Rubín. He affirmed that "there are candidates for municipal elections who hand out medicines". The leader explained that, in the sections of the Colorado Party, especially in the neighborhoods of Asunción, it is the local authorities of the party who "end up handing out medicines, bringing doctors". The leader said that "we must not forget

that Paraguay went through 70 years of power of the Colorado Party, and that there is a whole system of education and health perished and without budget, with clientelist management”.

This Monday, when he took office as Minister of Health, Julio Borba said that he talked with Abdo and other members of the cabinet about how to accelerate the arrival of the vaccines, although he clarified that he does not want to generate “false expectations” in this respect and that he will wait to know the exact date on which they will arrive before making it public. He also stated that the priority of his portfolio is that the medicines are distributed “in due time and form” to the hospitals, and announced that he will increase the controls on their commercialization to avoid speculation with them.

In addition to Borba’s entry, other changes in the government were announced: the head of the Civil Cabinet, Juan Ernesto Villamayor, will be replaced by Hernán Huttemann, who was an advisor to the Presidency, and the Vice Minister of Economy, Carmen Marín, will take the place of Hugo Cáceres as head of the Presidential Management Unit. According to Marín, she will work on health-related issues.

For Rubín, the crisis is due to the lack of management of the current government, which, in her opinion, did not do everything it should have done to obtain the vaccines, nor did it execute a good part of the US\$ 514 million that the Parliament approved last year to attend the health situation.

To the discomfort that all this generated was added an increase in public transportation fares, and a “disaster” in education. During 2020, there were almost no classes, and this year, despite the fact that it was possible to plan ahead, the conditions to achieve presentiality were not resolved either, said Rubín. “Teachers gave classes by Whatsapp, with connections that are cut,” said the opposition leader.

Another critical point was the repression of Friday's demonstration, which was peaceful, and to which the Police responded with rubber bullets and water cannons. All this was the straw that broke the camel's back, said Rubin, and recalled that before reaching this point, there was a good initial management of the pandemic, with the closing of businesses in time and a flattened curve of contagions, with very few cases, as in Uruguay. But in June, the first corruption scandals linked to the purchase of masks and other supplies with pharmaceutical companies became known, and there was also an increase in the number of cases. "In December the number went up, and in January even more, with more than 5,000 Paraguayans traveling to Brazil," he added.

Rubín recalled that, during the government of Fernando Lugo, who became president in an alliance between Frente Guasú and PLRA, in 2008, a free health system for the entire population was promoted, but those advances were reversed after his presidency ended, in 2012. "Having that system and decentralizing health would have been very good to get the vaccine now, so that people don't have to go to the larger hospitals," he considered.

About the coming days, Rubín said that in a "calm" country, such as Paraguay, where this type of demonstrations are not frequent, as it is in Chile, for example, it is possible that the protests will end. Although the demonstrators have asked "everyone to leave", there are calls from the Catholic Church and some unions to dialogue.

However, these protests have brought together broad sectors of the population, he said. Although some government representatives have said that the protests respond to leftist parties, to Lugo or Efraín Alegre, and some have even linked them to the Venezuelan government, "they are really massive social mobilizations" which do not respond to a political sector but to a discontent which is spreading among the population, said Rubín.