

# In Paraguay, presidential front-runner is son of aide to ex-dictator Stroessner

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Asuncion, Paraguay

The son of a top aide to former dictator Alfredo Stroessner is expected to be elected president of this South American nation as Paraguayans go to the polls Sunday.

The heavy favorite is Mario Abdo Benitez, 46, a former senator and standard-bearer of the center-right Colorado Party, which has long dominated governance in this land-locked nation of 6.8 million.

Abdo, a U.S.-educated construction magnate, is the son of the former private secretary of Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay in authoritarian fashion for 35 years until he was forced into exile in Brazil in 1989.

Stroessner, a Cold War ally of Washington and longtime leader of the Colorado Party, oversaw a military dictatorship that was notorious for the imprisonment, killings and "disappearances" of political opponents labeled "subversives" or communist sympathizers. Stroessner died in Brazil in 2006.

Abdo has disassociated himself from the dark Stroessner legacy and says he is committed to democracy and human rights. His father's link to Paraguay's late maximum leader does not appear to have diminished Abdo's chances of ascending to the presidency.

"I was 15 or 16 years old at the end of the Stroessner era; I wasn't involved in politics at that time," Abdo told an interviewer. "I represent politics in a positive fashion."

Abdo is running on a pro-business platform and backs Paraguay's current regimen of low taxes and an emphasis on the export market — policies that have drawn strong criticism from the left. The opposition has called for higher taxes on agricultural production as a means of reducing poverty and inequality, especially in rural areas, where about 40% of Paraguayans still reside.

Some polls show Abdo with an advantage of as many as 25 points over his chief opponent, Efraim Alegre Sasiain, who represents a coalition of center-left parties known as the Alianza Ganar, or Win Alliance.

The opposition alliance includes the party of former center-left President Fernando Lugo, an ex-Roman Catholic bishop whose election in 2008 broke the Colorado Party's historic grip on power. Lugo, a candidate for a Senate seat in Sunday's balloting, was removed from the presidency in 2012 in a disputed impeachment process.

Paraguay has enjoyed an economic boom in recent years thanks largely to exports of commodities, especially soybeans, and the production of hydroelectric power at the huge Itaipu and Yacyreta plants. Much of the economic growth has been concentrated in the capital, Asuncion, where new shopping malls, hotel complexes and apartment buildings have sprung up in recent years.

However, critics say the export-fueled boom has largely benefited the country's elite in a nation where more than one-quarter of the population still lives in poverty. Various peasant movements demanding more equitable distribution of resources occasionally clash with Paraguayan authorities.

"The challenge for the next government is to spread equality and fight against poverty so that the macroeconomic success is shared by more sectors of Paraguayan society," said Augusto dos Santos, a political analyst.

Paraguay's next president will succeed the current chief executive, Horacio Cartes, of the Colorado Party. The new president is to serve a five-year term beginning in August without the possibility of reelection, under current constitutional rules.

More than 4 million are eligible to vote in Sunday's elections in Paraguay, which is slightly larger geographically than Japan. Along with the president, Paraguayans will be voting for all of the nation's congressional seats and 17 gubernatorial posts.

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