

A Paraguayan Coup

Wolfgang Kaleck, 3 August 2015

Is anyone still interested in the coup in Paraguay? After all it's been three years since Fernando Lugo, a president influenced by his studies in liberation theology, was ousted from office on 22 June 2012. The country's Latin American neighbors suspended Paraguay from the regional alliance Mercosur in response to the abrupt, putsch-like impeachment. Experts said the dubious political maneuver, which saw the conservative Colorado party take power, was unconstitutional – though this didn't stop the then German FDP Development Minister Niebel from expressly welcoming it. The impeachment came in the wake of police violence against land occupation by farmers in the Curuguaty province in a clash that left eleven farmers and six police officers dead.

Last week saw the start of trials relating to these deaths. Will it come as a surprise to anyone to learn that the proceedings are directed solely against the landless farmers and not against any of the perpetrators within police ranks?

Disputed land rights

German and Latin American NGOs have criticized the inadequate and one-sided investigation into the incident by state prosecutors. There are serious questions around the basis of the police action itself, as the land title relied on to expel the alleged squatters is highly contested. The evidence due to be brought against the accused individuals at trial is also questionable given that it is unclear whether some were even present at the scene of the incident. Human rights activists are critical of the increasing repression of those fighting for land rights – there are even reports of torture and extrajudicial murders. This is the issue at the heart of it all: access to the land that is so unjustly distributed in Paraguay. Most of the land is in the hands of a small elite in what resembles a giant plantation for export crops such as corn, sugarcane and soya, often grown using toxic pesticides.

Guardians of democracy?

Not long ago I spoke with the farmers' lawyers, dedicated colleagues in the fight against a corrupt and all-powerful justice system. As a result of their work they themselves have now become targets of state repression. In Paraguay the indigenous majority population is subjected to an endless barrage of robbery and murders while perpetrators enjoy impunity. Yet Germany and the European Union won't speak out against these ongoing human rights violations. In this way the politicians orchestrating maneuvers like Lugo's impeachment are rewarded for their boundless ingenuity in twisting democratic processes while maintaining the pretense of being "guardians of democracy", as Josef Oehrlein described it in the *FAZ*. It's a dictum that could also apply to the similar putsch against Manuel Zelaya's leftist government in Honduras in 2009, after which the human rights situation there deteriorated dramatically. The current trials in Paraguay provide a good opportunity to address the many failures, including by Europeans, over the past few years and to support the beleaguered social movements of the landless. This is important for many reasons, in particular to prevent the establishment of another authoritarian state in South America.