



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Paraguay 1947

Executive Summary

Paraguay experienced an internal conflict, known as the Barefoot Revolution from March 7 to August 20, 1947.¹ Although the Paraguayan Civil War lasted less than six months, it profoundly impacted the country's politics and governance.

The conflict was between the Paraguayan government under the Colorado Party against the Liberal Party and Febrerista Party. The Paraguayan government faced many rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1940, former Defense Minister General Higinio Morínigo became president following the death of President José Félix Estigarribia. Morínigo wielded extraordinary executive power. He suspended civil rights and banned political parties in government, including the Febrerista and Liberal parties. The government suspended the constitution in the early 1940s, leading to major riots and protests, followed by restrictions on free speech and a clampdown on individual liberties.²

In 1946, Morinigo created a two-party system to allow for political opposition. The Febreristas (leftist) and Colorado (conservative) parties were allowed to participate in the government, resulting in Febreristas resigning from the cabinet and leading a rebellion to overthrow Morinigo. Colonel Rafael Franco led this coup with an unlikely coalition of leftist parties.³ The coup d'état failed and was followed by a full-scale civil war in 1947, when a coalition of the Febrerista, Communist, and Liberal parties launched an insurrection against Morinigo's government. The Colorado Party supported the government in power.⁴

Numerous divisions of the military mutinied and joined the opposing side, while others remained loyal to Morinigo. The conflict began in Concepción, a leftist-oriented city, and spread from north to south toward the capital of Asunción.⁵ The Colorados, led by Lieutenant Colonel Alfredo Stroessner Mattiauda, then commander of an artillery regiment, stood in support of Morinigo's administration.⁶ Under Colonel Rafael Franco, the revolutionaries were comprised of a coalition of Febreristas, Liberals, and communist forces united in their desire to overthrow Morinigo. Morinigo was backed by the Colorado Party's hardliners and separate paramilitary group, the *Guion Rojo*. They eventually crushed the insurgency after a series of victories under Stroessner, who became the longest-serving president in Paraguay's history. The goal of the government forces was to contain the rebel group in the city of Concepción. Despite setbacks and some rebel victories, government forces pushed into Horqueta with the rebels abandoning Concepción.⁷

In August, the rebels launched a last-ditch attempt to capture the capital by river by taking Puerto Milargo, seizing government warships and sailing to the capital, disembarking at Arecutacúá. From there, they marched to the capital and were met with heavy resistance, suffering from poor logistics. After reaching the outskirts of the capital, the rebels panicked, demoralized by government reinforcements

from the north that led to their unconditional surrender. The rebel leadership refused to surrender and fled into Argentina.⁸ The enlisted men were given amnesty, but many surrendering officers were executed.⁹

This conflict, continuing until it approached Asuncion, meets the criteria for inclusion in the Study of Internal Conflict. In the Paraguayan Civil War, the government *was* one of the two conflicting sides (the other was comprised of three political parties, whose goal *was* to overthrow the existing leader in power and change the political system). Estimates suggest one third of the population fled the country.¹⁰ It is a rare post-war case where the armed group(s) contesting for national power did not employ guerilla warfare to a significant degree and instead fought the conflict as a conventional war.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. There is a strong case for a Paraguayan national identity. Very few residents thought of themselves as anything other than Paraguayan, certainly well above the 85 percent “cut-line.” This statistic is true in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion. The *Pynandi* (“barefooted”) militias identified with the nation and displayed a strong sense of nationalism.¹¹ They were fanatical peasant supporters of the Colorado Party, comprised of ex-combatants imbued with a strong sense of national identity. In their minds, the views of the liberals, the communists, and the Febreristas were discredited by their alliance as unpatriotic.¹²

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. The majority of the population saw the government under Morínigo as the legitimate power, with members of the Febreistas Party and the Liberal Party seeing it as illegitimate. The series of Paraguayan “strong man” rulers the country had since its independence from Spain in 1811 normalized and legitimated this government. Morínigo’s role as the war minister of the previous president positioned him for a natural succession to power. He gained fame earlier by leading an expedition to retrieve the remains of an important Paraguayan national figure (Lopez) in 1936 and was popular when he assumed power. The government had the backing of militia groups, that maintained a strong national sense of identity with the Colorado Party and national government and viewed the Febrerista Party and the Liberal Party as unpatriotic.¹³

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?

Yes. Despite the military being split between the government and rebel armies, the government was able to protect much of the population due to the backing of the Colorado Party and its militia.¹⁴

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. The insurgents never had external sanctuary to a militarily significant degree because of its short duration and the conventional nature of the fighting.¹⁵ The conflict began in March 1947 and ended in August 1947. The conflict was about the political divisions within the country that played out within the uniformed military and the opposition would not be welcomed in the neighboring countries of Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. In fact, Argentina sided with the Morínigo government during the war.¹⁶

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Paraguay needed to address its sovereignty, independence, and subsequent major wars. Paraguay possessed a reasonably competent and self-sustaining military force in 1947. The conflict split the military between those loyal to the government and those supporting the rebels, resulting in a large turnover in personnel with more than 80 percent of officers joining the rebels. Morínigo had strong paramilitary backing from the Pynandi (“barefooted”) militias of the Colorado Party and other citizen groups.¹⁷

Outcome

Government victory. President Higinio Morínigo initially remained in power as the Febrerista Party and the Liberal Party failed to overthrow him to create a democratic form of governance in Paraguay. At the end of the conflict in August 1947, the Colorado Party became the only legal political party in the country. The Colorado Party later split between the radical hardliners (*guionistas*) under Natalicio González, and the moderates (*democráticos*) under Federico Chaves. The *guionistas*, with Morínigo’s backing, were able to intimidate the moderates into supporting the candidacy of their leader, González, as the Colorado Party’s presidential nominee for the upcoming election (in which he would run unopposed). Suspecting that Morínigo would not relinquish his power in the elections of 1948, a group of Colorado officers ousted him and allowed González to take power directly. González soon joined Morínigo in exile in 1949, succeeded by his rival Chaves in 1950, when power passed to the *democrático* wing of the party.¹⁸ The SOIC definition of victory stipulates that a conflict ends in a government victory “if the political entity which was in power at the start of the conflict *or its natural successors* was still in power 18 months after the end of the conflict.” Since Morínigo did not survive as president of Paraguay for 18 months after the end of the conflict, it might be argued that the result of the conflict was a government defeat. His natural successors in the Colorado Party remained in power, the goals of the opposing group to achieve a more democratic Paraguay were not achieved, and the political structure of the country remained intact. This case is considered a government victory and supports the Five Factors model.

PARAGUAY 1947	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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