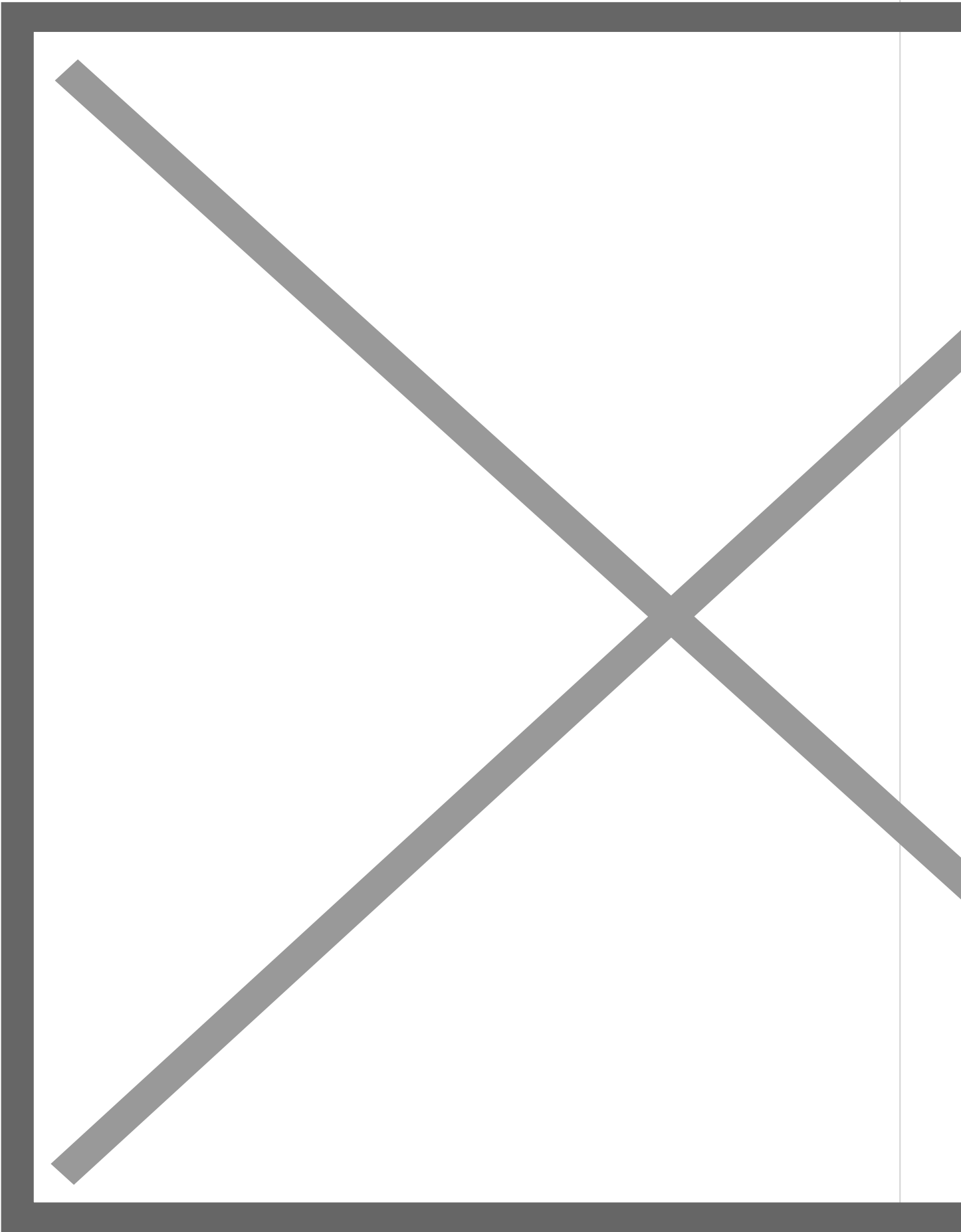


Paraguay opens electoral cycle in Latin America

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by Josefina Arce

Paraguay marks the beginning of this year's electoral cycle in Latin America, where Guatemala and Argentina will also go to the polls, in that order, amid a complex situation in the region, defined by an economic crisis and high inflation.

On April 30, some five million Paraguayans are called to elect the new president of the South American country and the vice-president, senators, deputies, governors, and councilors.

Although 13 candidates are running for the presidency, the race seems to be centered between Efraín Alegre, of the opposition *Concertación por un Nuevo Paraguay*, and Santiago Peña, of the Colorado Party, which has dominated the political scene for more than 70 years.

The Colorado hegemony was only interrupted in 2008 when it was overthrown by a coalition of leftist parties and movements. Former bishop Fernando Lugo won the elections and became president, but was subject to a parliamentary coup in 2012, and his plans to work in favor of the most humble were hindered from the beginning by the oligarchy.

So far for April 30th, polls show opposing trends. Some give Alegre as the winner, while others opt for Peña. The rest of the aspirants remain well behind.

The winner, who will be decided in the first round, since Paraguay does not contemplate a second round, will replace the current president Mario Abdo Benítez on August 15 for a period of five years, whose administration, according to polls, is rated by a large majority of the citizens as bad.

The new president will have an arduous task to move forward in a country where poverty reached 24.7% last year and where there is a high level of functional illiteracy.

Statistics reveal that 25% of young people are out of the educational system and only 25% enter university, in addition to the lack of infrastructure.

Another front will be the fight against corruption, a decades-old evil, institutionalized, according to experts, under the dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner, in power from 1954 to 1989.

Another debt is owed to the indigenous peoples, who represent 1.7% of the population out of a total of seven million. In addition to suffering discrimination, the rates of poverty, marginalization, and health problems are much higher than in other segments of the population.

Nothing is certain yet regarding the elections on the coming 30th, which many predict will be tight. We will see if Paraguayans bet on a change or another Colorado Party government.

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