

**Clashes as Paraguay lawmakers impeach president**  
**By Thomas Lyford-Pike (AFP)**  
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ASUNCION — Paraguayan lawmakers have impeached president Fernando Lugo over his handling of a deadly land dispute, prompting an angry din across Latin America and refusals to recognize his successor.

In a 39-to-4 vote Friday, senators found Lugo, a 61-year-old former Catholic priest with a string of outstanding paternity cases, guilty of performing his duties badly during a land dispute last week that left 17 people dead.

An hour later, to cheers inside Congress and angry clashes outside, 49-year-old vice president Federico Franco was sworn in as the new leader of one of Latin America's poorest nations.

"The process took place in a manner that was a little bit quick and it took me and all Paraguayans by surprise," Franco said, hours after taking the oath of office and as he set about swearing in new ministers.

Police, some on horseback, had used tear gas and water cannons to beat back crowds of thousands outside Congress chanting "Lugo, president!" and tearing down fences.

Lugo -- who rose to power in 2008 as a champion of the poor, ending more than six decades of rule by the right-wing Colorado Party -- called for calm in a brief speech before leaving the presidential palace.

"I submit to the decision of Congress," Lugo said, adding that "the history of Paraguay and its democracy have been deeply wounded."

"Today I retire as president, but not as a Paraguayan citizen," he said. "May the blood of the just not be spilled."

Holed up in the palace earlier while events in the Senate took their course, he said the lawmakers' action was "more than a coup d'etat -- it's a parliamentary coup dressed up as a legal procedure."

A torrent of furious responses poured in from across the region, not just from traditional leftist allies like Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, but also from centrist and right-wing governments in Argentina and Chile.

"Without any doubt there has been a coup d'etat in Paraguay. It is unacceptable," said Argentina's President Cristina Kirchner.

She added that the issue would be discussed next week at a summit of the South American trade bloc Mercosur, which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

"In the name of the Venezuelan people and as head of state, Venezuela does not recognize this worthless, illegal and illegitimate government that has been installed in Asuncion," blasted Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, in words echoed by Bolivian and Nicaraguan leaders.

Peruvian President Ollanta Humala called the move a "setback to the democratic process in the region."

Even in Santiago, where Sebastian Pinera is Chile's first right-wing president since the late dictator Augusto Pinochet left office, there was disbelief.

The impeachment "did not fulfill the minimum requirements for this type of procedure," Foreign Minister Alfredo Moreno said on national television.

Central American nations issued a joint statement urging the international community to reject Lugo's impeachment.

In Washington, a US State Department spokeswoman, Darla Jordan, said: "We urge all Paraguayans to act peacefully, with calm and responsibility, in the spirit of Paraguay's democratic principles."

Lawmakers announced the surprise move against Lugo after clashes last week left at least six police and 11 squatters dead on a huge estate poor farmers claim was acquired by political influence decades ago.

Lugo sacked his interior minister and Paraguay's police chief to try to defuse the crisis, which highlighted the president's failure to redistribute land to the poor in a country where only a gilded few have all the wealth.

But the president became isolated when the Colorado Party joined forces in the impeachment bid with the Authentic Radical Liberal Party, part of his ruling coalition.

Lugo appealed the impeachment proceedings before the Supreme Court, saying they were unconstitutional and that under the law he had the right to delay the process for 18 days to give him time to prepare his defense.

As it turned out, five lawyers acting on the president's behalf had only two hours to present their case in the Senate, where only four of 45 senators remained allied to Lugo.

The suddenly former president, who was recently treated for lymphatic cancer, had already said he would not seek another term in April 2013 elections.

Underscoring the gravity of the crisis, foreign ministers from the regional grouping UNASUR were dispatched to Paraguay from a UN environment summit in Rio de Janeiro after the lower house vote on Thursday.

Extremely popular at the time of his election, Lugo saw his reputation in this predominantly Catholic country take a nosedive by repeated claims he fathered children while under a vow of chastity.

Earlier this month, he acknowledged being the father of Angel, a 10-year-old boy. In 2009, Lugo admitted to being the father of another three-year-old boy. He faces at least two other paternity suits.

Franco, a surgeon by training, has said he is inspired by former center-left Latin American leaders such as Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Chile's Michelle Bachelet.

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