

Peru in Flames

December 19, 2022



Protestors in massive demonstrations in Peru carry a banner saying that the people repudiate the sell-out congress. The sign in the middle says, "Freedom for President Castillo."

Twenty-one dead. That's the cost so far of the political crisis caused by the right-wing impeachment push that was followed the declaration by Pedro Castillo announcing the closure of Congress and the formation of an emergency government.

In the last five years Peru has had six presidents (and has elected three parliaments and hundreds of ministers have circulated through the public administration, making it more chaotic and inefficient than usual). There is no guarantee that in the coming weeks we will not have a seventh.

We must retrace steps taken the past if we want to understand what's happening and begin to see possible ways out.

A democratic transition truncates

In November 2000, from the city of Tokyo, then-President Alberto Fujimori resigned. A regime that had been all-powerful until then was collapsing. The Transitional Government of Valentín Paniagua was formed, which called for elections. Alejandro Toledo, the public leader of the opposition during the last stage, won, while Fujimorismo did not even present a candidate.

The new government that took office in 2001, instead of dismantling authoritarian structures, as well as the neoliberal economic model, traded on the past in what was called Fujimorismo without Fujimori. Businessmen, politicians and technocrats who had been part of the Fujimori scaffolding were recycled as democrats. The corrupt structures and practices that, being old, had acquired

industrial dimensions during the Fujimori decade, remained intact, to the point that today Alejandro Toledo is in the process of extradition from the US for the millions of dollars received from the Brazilian company Odebrecht.

American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), a historic Peruvian left nationalist party dating from the 1920s, won the presidential election with Alan García, an astute politician who brought together the conservative vote by stoking the politics of fear of “Chavismo,” establishing himself as a champion of continuity.

The rising social unrest that resulted was capitalized on by an obscure army commander, Ollanta Humala, who won 48% of the vote in the second round. On October 29, 2000, this soldier and his younger brother, Antauro, had carried out an attempt at rebellion in southern Peru. On December 10 both and their small troops surrendered and on December 21 they were amnestied by Congress. Ollanta rejoined his military career and Antauro created the Peruvian Nationalist Movement, an “ethnocacerist” political organization calling for an indigenous dictatorship of the proletariat and based on Army graduates. The “ethnocacerist” uprising of Andahuaylas on January 1, 2005 produced four deaths. Three days later the rebels surrendered. Antauro Humala was imprisoned for 18 years, but the uprising catapulted the political career of his brother, who came close to winning in 2006.

In 2011 Ollanta Humala represented the forces of change, the hope of the poor of Peru, especially in the central and southern Andean regions that massively gave him their vote. Again, he won the first round with 30% and for the second he decided to run to the center, in a turn that allowed him to win, at the cost of making deals with the powers that be. The economy remained on “autopilot” and the large social and regional economic inequalities remained untouched. Popular hopes were disappointed. What was new about this election was that Keiko Fujimori, who had been able to recover her father’s inheritance (both material and symbolic), became the political figure of the conservative forces. The 6% that she obtained in 2006 became 48% in the second round. Fujimorismo was once again a national protagonist. And this is one of the vectors that would precipitate the crisis to the depths in which Peru now finds itself.

Where the market took us

In 1990 Alberto Fujimori won the elections offering that he would not do the “neoliberal-shock” proposed by his opponent, the writer Mario Vargas Llosa. However, once in government, he implemented his rival’s economic program in a rigorous and even augmented manner. This orientation has been maintained now for next thirty years, acquiring legal status in the 1993 Constitution that relegated the state to a subsidiary role as it further denationalized the economy, auctioned off public companies opened the floodgates to foreign products and investments, and accentuated its primary-export character, all creating more precarious employment.

This extreme neoliberalism, as did not occur elsewhere in Latin America—Pinochet for example did not privatize the large-scale mining nationalized by Allende—was possible because it was legitimized by the successes of the government in its counter-subversive struggle, because the prolonged economic crisis had disintegrated the social sectors that could have offered some resistance (trade unionism, for example, vanished as the small industrial base was destroyed) and because of the deep crisis of the political left.

Open to the winds of the world economy, Peru became more affected by its oscillations. The first fifteen years of the twentieth century the Chinese locomotive raised the prices of raw materials and times were good. Protected by long-term contracts, mining companies greatly increased their profits without significantly increasing the revenues of the State or the communities in whose territories the exploitation takes place (despite leaving enormous environmental liabilities). There was the

paradox of a country that was growing, but except for a slight strip of middle and upper sectors, most Peruvians did not receive those benefits.

Public spending in sectors such as education and health was cut and there was an increasing privatization of these services, which led, for example, to the State having just over 100 ICU beds to attend to the emergency during the recent COVID pandemic and not being able to supply the growing demand for oxygen by affected patients, which put Peru at the forefront of mortality figures worldwide. But while the population was battered by the virus, private clinics profited disproportionately from the impotence of the state (bound by the 1993 Constitution) to protect its citizens.

The historic virus of corruption

Corruption is a component that runs throughout the history of Peru, but it was during the first government of Alan García (1985–1990) that this process accelerated. This resulted both from the historical desire of an old party that had never governed, and from the fact that in those years the corrupting activity par excellence took off: drug trafficking.

While it was with APRA that corruption expanded, it is with Fujimori that it became a sophisticated industry in which the entire machinery of the state was put to work as a corrupt entity. The brain and motor of this complex machine was Vladimiro Montesinos Torres. In various ways, his operation extracted resources from public institutions (especially the Armed Forces), and from illicit activities (such as drug trafficking and arms trafficking) to create a gigantic parallel payroll of officials who received succulent additional income in exchange for their subordination. In world history there is no film documentation as detailed and eloquent as that existing in the videos recorded by Vladimiro Montesinos. Politicians, magistrates, businessmen, and top-level public officials passed through its hall. All of them left with their envelopes containing thousands of dollars in cash.

Without holding any official position (except that of advisor to the Intelligence Service) Montesinos was the real power behind the throne and the true spirit of Fujimorismo. To his offices came generals of several stars, the richest businessmen (seeking judicial favors) and above all the owners of television stations, who in exchange for juicy bribes put their information systems at the service of the regime.

With democracy, corruption did not recede, but was itself democratized and became decentralized. The government, parliament, the judiciary, regional governments and municipalities all became corrupt. César Álvarez, president of the regional government of Ancash between 2007 and 2014, managed a gang of hitmen who killed their rivals. In 2018, IDL-Reporteros, an NGO dedicated to investigative journalism, broadcast some audios that disrupted a mafia network in the Judiciary that they called “Los Cuellos Blancos,” a group charged with making appointments of magistrates and for fabricating sentences intended to favor the litigant who paid. And they were not isolated cases, but extended to cover all the institutions of the judiciary (Judges, Prosecutor’s Office, and the National Council of the Magistracy).

Undoubtedly the star case because of its political implications is that linked to the Brazilian company Odebrecht, which paid bribes of tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars to presidents, ministers, senior officials and candidates in the campaign, in order to be favored with the award of public works and accept the increase in construction cost that harmed the finances of the Peruvian state. Four former presidents, mayors, regional presidents and countless officials are included in this corrupt tangle, which would have been easily covered by a compliant justice system, if it were not for the fact that the scandal came from Brazil and there was no way to get it out of the spotlight of public opinion. Three former presidents are being prosecuted for this corruption case and another,

Alan García, committed suicide when he was going to be arrested.

You can understand why politics is so discredited and why parliament is the institution with the worst approval ratings. Ever since politics became a branch of business and a manager of private interests, the political system has been in crisis.

The 2016 elections and the installation of instability

With 48% of the votes obtained in 2011, Keiko Fujimori felt sure she would become president in 2016. To this end, she had oiled the political machinery, affirmed her leadership and threw herself into accumulating the funds to which the businessmen contributed enormous resources.

She won almost 40% of the vote in the first round, but in the second a broad anti-Fujimorist coalition defeated her by just 40,000 votes. Instead, obtained a parliamentary majority. Unable to defeat Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, she used that majority to hack the government of right-wing businessman and did not stop until she forced him out after two years in office. If Keiko Fujimori should be thanked for anything, it is that she has destroyed the long idyll that existed between a large sector of the people and the Fujimori surname. Her arrogance was so notorious that it destroyed that popular support.

The alliance between Keiko Fujimori and Martín Vizcarra to drive out PPK was soon broken, because the latter got fed up with being treated as a subordinate and with Congress having him in its sights. He forced the closure of Congress and called for new parliamentary elections, in which the stubborn place of Fujimorismo was occupied by Popular Action, one of whose representatives, Manuel Merino, pushed for the dismissal of Martín Vizcarra, who squandered his popularity by secretly vaccinating against COVID. Merino lasted for a few days as president and was driven from office by popular protest. Francisco Sagasti then assumed a transitional government and called elections.

Covid and the worst face of capitalism

For two years the whole world, and Peru within it, were hit by the scourge of the COVID which affected public health, the economy and politics. The pandemic brought out the social fractures, showed how unguarded and abandoned by their state the citizens were, particularly the poorest, but not only them. The illusion that we had embarked on the path to becoming a first-world country was laid bare as a fallacy. That President Martín Vizcarra was secretly vaccinated (and with him his wife)—when others had no access to vaccination—was the clearest sign of the lack of civic spirit of those who assume public functions.

The neoliberal common sense that had permeated Peruvian society so much by making the discourse of entrepreneurship a widespread idea, was shaken by the reality of those who could not find a clinic or a hospital bed for their relatives, or had to get oxygen balloons at impossible prices. They suddenly discovered that the market wasn't everything.

The 2021 elections and the peasant vote

In the 2021 elections, the most notable feature was the fracture of the right in general and Fujimorismo in particular. So much so, that Pedro Castillo Terrones, a rural teacher and trade unionist, without much political experience and without an articulated project for the country, prevailed in the first round of the elections with 19% of the votes. A small organization of the provincial left and with somewhat outdated ideas calling Free Peru, was thrown upward on the crest of a wave that put it in first place.

This was particularly the result of the vote of the central and southern rural Andean populations who

felt represented by this candidate who wore the distinctive hat of the peasants of his land, the mountain province of Chota. A bold campaign on the ground, with simple proposals, allowed his popularity to grow rapidly in the final weeks leading up to the vote. While the mainstream media concentrated on attacking the central figure of the left, Verónica Mendoza, they treated Castillo with complacency, presuming that he would take away votes from what they perceived as the favorite of the discontented sectors of the population.

The dispersion of the right reduced Keiko Fujimori to second place with only 13.5% of the vote (compared to 40% five years before). In the 2016 election, the candidate of the left, who had obtained almost the same vote as Castillo in 2021, failed to make it to the second round, which was contested between two candidates from the right.

The rightwing politicians and media went into shock because an apparently more radical version of the left was shaping up and marching towards the entourage of candidate Castillo was made up of elements supposedly with links with “terrorism.” They brought out to all their artillery of accusations and name-calling. This was so crude that it produced the opposite effect.

Pedro Castillo was a candidate without clear ideas or rhetoric. However, a broad anti-Fujimorista coalition was formed that allowed him to win by just over 40,000 votes. Fujimorismo and the extreme right refused to accept the result. They alleged fraud, without being able to substantiate any of their claims. To the determination of the Peruvian electoral bodies was added that of the U.S. State Department, and consequently of the Organization of American States, and then of the European Union. The die was cast and Pedro Castillo was sworn in as president on July 28, 2022.

From the rightist politicians, business leaders, and the media, the campaign against the government of Pedro Castillo was fierce. If they had not been able to prevent his access to the government, they were determined to overthrow him as soon as possible. They would seek the votes to do so, change the laws that were necessary, and spread all kinds of infamy.

If this element must be credited with something, it is that they were clear in their purposes and did not stop at the media.

Strategic confusion

The first and most serious strategic mistake of Peru Libre and Castillo, from the beginning of his administration, was to have refused to maintain – and as far as possible expand – the bloc of alliances (more implicit than formal, but no less important) with the spectrum of anti-neoliberal, democratic, progressive and leftist forces that were the ones that brought Castillo to government as part of the “anti-Keikista” grand coalition. This was a sign of both a lack of strategy and of a consistent project. It was paradoxical that, being aware of the circumstantial and random nature of the victory of “teacher” Castillo—as they recognized publicly—they did not draw the consequences of the case.

It is one thing to represent and another to govern. Pedro Castillo’s first cabinet was not a well-balanced team. Some ministries were distributed among the allies of the left and others to repay favors or campaign support. The first casualty came three weeks after being sworn in. The Navy asked for the head of Héctor Béjar, former guerrilla of the 60s, Juan Velasco Alvarado’s coup and left nationalist government of the 70s and later a leftist academic. He was a man qualified for the position, but would Castillo be willing to support him in the face of the campaigns unleashed against him? The question soon cleared: he was asked to resign. From the very beginning, what little firmness this popular government showed!

Less than three months later there was a rupture between Pedro Castillo and Peru Libre, the party that had brought him to government. Replacing Guido Bellido as prime minister was Mirtha Vásquez, who came from the same region and who had been appointed president of the Congress; she was a woman of the moderate left, that Vladimir Cerrón, leader of Free Peru, disparagingly called “caviars.” The new cabinet lasted just over three months, when the premier resigned in solidarity with her interior minister who demanded presidential support to purge the police high command. Then Pedro Castillo took the opportunity to get rid of some of his leftist allies in the cabinet, such as the doctor Hernando Zevallos and the two ministers of Nuevo Peru, then to rebuild his relations with Free Peru he offered it the Ministry of Health as a consolation prize. What led Pedro Castillo to these sharp turns? These successive cabinet changes only contributed to weakening the government, showing a disconcerting lack of direction.

After an unfortunate appointment of Héctor Valer Pinto as premier, who lasted less than two weeks, leaving the pathetic impression of political incompetence to select people to such important public positions, Aníbal Torres, a lawyer specializing in administrative law and old university professor, was appointed premier. Although he had no political experience, lacked a reforming spirit and in more than one aspect had conservative conceptions, he was a man with guts and a fighting spirit, willing to fight in defense of the government of Pedro Castillo against the rightwing politicians and media that gave no respite. The resignation of Aníbal Torres and the appointment of Congresswoman Betsy Chávez were due to the search to respond with the closure of Congress to the coup efforts of the right.

The two branches, the executive and the legislative, were heading for a collision.

Corrupt environments

Lacking a political organization, President Pedro Castillo surrounded himself with an environment of relatives, fellow teachers and countrymen who assumed positions of trust. Ministries such as Transport and Housing and Construction, important for the considerable budgets allocated to public works they manage, were entrusted to people of dubious backgrounds who are today involved in corruption investigations and one of them is a fugitive.

The first secretary general of the Government Palace, who worked directly with the president, was found in the bathroom of his office \$ 20,000 that he had no way to explain. After a period of hiding, he turned himself into police and began to provide information.

Salatíel Marrufo, a senior official of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, after being arrested told prosecutors that he and the minister gave large sums of money to President Castillo.

These statements, conveniently leaked by the Prosecutor’s Office to the press, and duly magnified by it, were part of the right-wing campaign to drive Castillo out of office.

True or not, these testimonies (and others) given by people who were part of Pedro Castillo’s trusted environment, to say the least, leave the feeling that he did not know how to choose people he could trust.

Lawfare

If by “lawfare” we mean the use of the law and the institutions of justice to carry out political persecution, we are facing an emblematic case. Never before has a president been so viciously persecuted by the Prosecutor’s Office, acting in concert with the media and the right-wing promoter of impeachment in the Congress. Never had a prosecutor broken into the government palace with such self-confidence. And not precisely because we are facing higher levels of corruption, but

because it was an uncomfortable and what they saw as a weak government that they wanted to get rid of.

The same media that turned a blind eye to previous governments in which gigantic sums of money were at stake, now looked with a magnifying glass at the slightest slip. The campaign they carried out was so intense and so obviously biased, that they have ended up irreparably damaging their reputation. The image of a “corrupted” press, of a “sold” press, has been strongly installed in broad sectors of the population that no longer believe in their denunciations, although they could be true. That is the cost of playing partisanly rather than rehearsing a minimum of objectivity.

After the offensive against the government of Pedro Castillo and the repressive and propaganda campaign after his dismissal, came the same counter-subversive logic of thirty years ago. It is the same military-business-media bloc. The use of what has been called “terruqueo” is the most important instrument of political control, given the inability to generate consensus. It not only tries to delegitimize social protest but to place it in the enemy camp. It dehumanizes the adversary and in doing so, everything is allowed.

The “D” Day

December 7 will go down in history as the date on which the Congress of Peru, under the baton of the extreme right, planned a coup d'état. To pressure the parliamentarians to join their campaign, one after another witnesses were paraded on television claiming that Pedro Castillo was corrupt. That same day 7 in the morning, Salatiel Marrufo, a corrupt former official, accused the president before a congressional commission. A well-put together and, above all, very timely script.

President Pedro Castillo until the previous day had been preparing his defense, according to his lawyer and the head of his cabinet of advisers. In previous days he had asked if the Armed Forces would support him in the closure of parliament and received the refusal (the general commander of the Army resigned from his position so as not to commit). Pedro Castillo was known to have no institutional backing. Even Peru Libre, his former ally, proved to be two-faced, because while its leader Vladimir Cerrón said that it would not support his removal, in Congress Cerrón's brother Valdemar voted with the extreme right to admit it to debate.

His vice-president and until recently minister, Dina Boluarte, was preparing to replace him and conspiring with his adversaries.

It is on the morning of December 7 that Pedro Castillo, apparently absolutely alone, since no one from his inner circle now recognizes having been part of the decision, prepared and issued a message to the nation in which he announced the dissolution of Congress, the reorganization of the prosecutor's office, the judiciary and the national council of the magistracy. The plan was launched in absolute isolation: without military support, without political support, without participation of the main social organizations. It was a coup attempt, the gesture of a salute to the flag, an announcement from which no practical consequences were derived because in fact the president had already ceased to be president even before Congress overturned him.

Various crazy theories circulate as to why Pedro Castillo issue such a pronouncement, such as that he was drugged or that someone pointed a gun at him. The truth is that a man cornered politically and judicially, played with the only thing he had left: his word.

The broadcast of the message was a bombshell. First his ministers resigned, one after another (some took their time to see which way the wind was blowing). The parliament convened to vote on the motion to remove him, which received 101 votes, exceeding the 87 required. Shortly after, Dina

Boluarte was sworn in as president, intending to complete the mandate until 2026.

With no other company than that of his former premier Anibal Torres, Pedro Castillo, now defeated, tried to reach the Mexican embassy to seek asylum. He couldn't. Caught in the middle of the city's traffic, he was arrested by his own escort and taken to a police station. The police high command had already ignored Pedro Castillo as president even before Congress removed him. He was then transferred to the prison where former President Fujimori is serving his sentence and with unusual speed the judiciary issued a preventive detention for eighteen months.

The fascist right, those who never accepted his defeat, those who from the first day attacked in order to overthrow him, celebrated what they believed to be his victory. Obscene smiles were drawn on their faces. They had finally knocked down this upstart *cholo*, that terrorist or friend of terrorists!

The media deserves special mention because they were always the active agents promoting the campaign to drive Castillo from office. It was there that the promoters of his removal had a tribune. It was there that the pattern that led to the outcome of December 7 was set.

Popular Rebellion

Then, progressively, the shock waves of an explosion that had surprised locals and strangers, produced effects among those below. Without national and even regional leadership, Peru's poorest sectors convened themselves to reject the parliament's decision.

The affront against the president was taken as a personal affront against the peoples of Peru, particularly in the interior regions. They know the contempt that the right and upper classes feel for Pedro Castillo is, in reality, the contempt they feel for the poorest and most marginalized sectors. In the celebrations of the removal of Pedro Castillo are reflected the racism and arrogance that characterizes those who believe themselves to be the owners of the country. The government of Pedro Castillo didn't really change many of the policies that came before, we did not find measures that have endangered those at the top, nor have they benefited those below. In the statements of the simple men and women of the mobilized populations we find a constant: The elite did not let Castillo govern because he was one of them. And they are right.

Throughout Peru, the peoples are mobilizing, marching, blocking roads, declaring strikes. There are no identifiable political forces, no visible heads. Social networks show many people and many voices. It is spontaneity, it is the accumulated rage against racism and exclusion, against poverty and abandonment, of those who are considered second-class citizens.

The objectives, at least for now, are maximalist: immediate elections, closure of parliament, constituent assembly, freedom of Pedro Castillo, resignation of Dina Boluarte. The right-wing has unleashed a hurricane that has flags, but no organization or leadership. Antauro Humala, who wanted to put himself on the crest of the wave with lukewarm postures, has taken it upon himself to destroy his reputation among these sectors whom he felt were his social base.

So far, the government's response has been repression and the deaths are increasing day by day. In parliament, a bastion of the extreme right, the holding of early elections that would bury them is being denied. Clinging to their positions, they let the country continue to bleed.

To cover up their own responsibilities they appeal to the specter of "terrorism." the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement that both disappeared more than two decades ago are conveniently resurrect to serve as an excuse.

It's not yet clear what the outcome might be. It is a situation in which the deaths further inflame

rebellion. How many more will there be before a way out is found? Dina Boluarte was in charge of provoking an already inflamed people; Her eagerness to remain in power, the formation of a right-wing cabinet (from which ministers have begun to resign as a result of the deaths) is complemented by a parliament on a war footing. This ensures greater repression and greater instability.

- Lima, December 13, 2023