The Peru Power Grab

written by Alejandra Dinegro Martínez | November 18, 2020



In Peru, democracy has been usurped. A political bloc made up of the most conservative and grotesque elements of traditional politics has in a completely capricious manner carried out the impeachment of the person who was only a few days go president of the republic: Martín Vizcarra.

Since the Peruvian Congress decided on November 9 to remove the president for "permanent moral incapacity" by a vote of 105 in favor (out of 130 congresspeople), the response of the citizens has been unleashed in the form of a series of massive mobilizations, first in the capital of Lima and then the national level.

The protests have not stopped and on the contrary they have increased in both their participation and their power to mobilize as a result of the establishment of the new defacto government of Manuel Merino (former president of Congress) who has neither social nor political legitimacy. He took office and holds power with the backing of a Congress rejected by 72 percent of the population, according to a survey by Ipsos, a Peruvian polling organization.

It is important to mention that of the 130 members of Congress, 68 have pending investigations in the Peruvian judicial system for crimes such as embezzlement, abuse of authority, labor coercion, money laundering, aggravated usurpation, resistance to authority, and fraud among others; and this is a key point because it shows the enormous crisis of representation and of the institution of the parties that make up the legislature.

The Origins of the Current Crisis

Peru's current crisis is a result of a long and complex process that has sharpened in the last three years. Some critical political groups call it a crisis of the regime that has passed through several stage including the current on that could end up opening the door to certain structural changes.

Ever since the Lava Jato (or Car Wash) investigation in South America that implicated the Brazilian Odebrecht firm in numerous bribes to presidents and influential officials in many Latin American governments, including Brazi and Peru, the traditional political classes of both countries have been exposed before public opinion. What burst out in 2016 as a political scandal called into question the institutional order and the rules of the game established by the state.

The Lava Jato case in the Peruvian political situation brought in its wake in the last three years, three impeachments, including the investigation of three ex-presidents, the suicide of one former president, as well as investigations of two ex-mayor of Lima, and dozens of functionaries of various government agencies under investigation and house arrest. This explains in part a certain feeling of

abandonment among the political class which began to feel cornered by the justice system and socially condemned, but that given the absence of normative and representative institutions continued to engage in its old practices of clientelism, corruption, and abuse of power.

What is happening in Peru today is a consequence of that structural problem and Manuel Merino is not the cause of it, he is simply the expression of this crisis of the regime that is driven by its own agenda, completely separate from the interests of the majority of the country's citizens. While these grotesque groups fight to make themselves the dominant political force ignoring the electoral process and arguing over the divvying up of governmental positions, while judges cover up teir crimes and politicians oppose an electoral reform that would control them, the citizens organize and mobilize themselves.

Creating a National Scandal

In the last few months, a corrupt political block has formed that has manipulated a story to justify the impeachment of the former president and the changes in the established political system. This bloc have developed a fictious interpretation of the Constitution in order to justify the illegitimate government. The first part of this plot to eliminate Martín Vizcarra involved the case of the singer Richard Cisneros, known as "Richard Swing," who during Vizcarra's presidency had received 175,000 *soles* (US$50,000) for a lecture tour. Opponents of the president argued that Swing's employment was a case of political favoritism, an extradordinarily large payment to a narcissistic artist whose lectures were of dubious merit. A political opponent of the president recorded Vizcarra discussing ways in which to hide Swing's visits to Lima and at the same time selfies of Vizcarra and Swing also surfaced.

The bloc turned this situation into a scandal that ignited the public's discontent at a time when Peruvian families were questioning decisions made by the government during the pandemic, among them the chaotic distribution of bonuses, the economic shutdown that led to upaid layoffs, the lack of hospital beds, respirators and othe issues. In this context, the Richard Swing case took on a significance in the media, as if one were talking about some historic issue such as the Dreyfus case. While it was completely irrelevant, it served as the first step in building a case for impeachment.

A month later, three aspiring and useful collaborators agreed to that Martín Vizcarra received bribes and decided to testify to that. Regardless of whether or not that may be true, it was the second story that supported impeachment and soon became significant. The then government of Martín Vizcarra overestimated it popular support and trusted various political leaders. The isolation of his parliamentary delegation and of the party itself, which should have supported him in this tense situation, left him without maneuvering room to confront the hostile bloc.

The leaders of the parties that today voted to impeach Vizcarra were those who at the time assumed a similar position with regard to former president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, elected in 2016, with little parliamentary support in numerical terms and which ended up even weaker. Kuczynski had no option but to resign in favor of his vice president, Martín Vizcarra, who subsequently took office. Nevertheless, the executive-legislative conflict got to such a pont that it was necessary to dissolve Congress and call new elections. The new Congress was no guarantee of change.

The Character of the Peruvian Right

At this point, it's important to explain to the foreign reader that in Peru there have always existed rightwing political groups who have been anxious to turn the government into a tool of private interests. And that in the last thirty years they have benefited from a clearly neoliberal economic, political and cultural model protected by the main obstacle that prevents certain changes and

reforms in favor of public interests from being carried out in Peru: The Constitution of 1993.

Then there are the most conservative, racist, and repressive sectors of the society, who hve the audacity to fire point blank at indigenous communities or to call the the people of the Andes llamas and vicuñas." This the the group that has at this moment taken power by force and usurped the executive functions in circumstances that are seriously questionable from a constitutional and democratic point of view.

However, they couldn't have done it alone, that is, without some among the press that took charge of feeding the story that we mentioned earlier. The media is linked to another element of the right that controls banks, business associations, owners of clinics, insurance companies and universities, that has also contributed to this process. This sector of the right has greater influence in the means of communication, with those who manage public opinion, such as the networks of pundits who are regularly guest speakers on radio and television show who have a greater ability to make themselves heard. This group is the one that delegitimizes any citizen response and that preaches, at the encyclical level, the stigmatization of the sectors that are currently mobilizing.

This is the group that during the pandemic preferred to charge ten or fifteen thousand dollars to hospitalize a Covid-19 patient in its clinics or to charge a patient one hundred dollars for a molecular test to rule out this disease. This is the group that had to disguise its entrepreneurial appetites so that its evident inability to collaborate and to express human sympathy would not look so bad.

But as throughout history, the counterweight to theses powerful groups were initially left and progressive sectors that denounced in the legislature the breakdown of institutions and the profound corruption that Odebrecht had deepened, with all of the audio recordings that were distributed making clear the involvement of judges, politicians, businessmen, and former members of the National Council of Judges.

This group raised up a new banner calling for the convocation of a constituent assembly and the writing of a new constitution. It dis not succeed in penetrating the mass of the citizenry which looks askance at the parties of this sector. It did,, however, find great support among the organized elements of progressivism which continue to this day to raise those slogans.

There exists in Peru a long history of the use of popular demonstrations (the March de los Cuatro Suyos, the "Baguazo", the "Pulpin" law, the "Repartija" y the Closing of Congress) that have served to put forward reforms in favor of a more just and inclusive nation. Manuel Merino's illegitimate assumption of power together with his de facto cabinet is a new invitation to a transformation to be carried out on the threshold of the bicentenary of Peruvian independence.

The Fight for a Genuine Republic

Peru has been experiencing massive protests in all of its cities. These are movements led by young people and other citizens, self-organized and spontaneous, who have gone into the streets to demonstrate against an illegitimate government. The heterogenous citizenry, made up of different social classes, of different economic conditions, different geographical regions, and with diverse cultural practices, succeeded in breaking the myth of fear of the street as well as the notion of an apolitical generation.

The existence of popular power, despite what we believed for decades, has become explicit, it exists, and it expresses itself in a variety of protests that amplify the level of activism and he participaton of a generation that bases its organization in the social networks of Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. In addition to the *cacerolazos* (the banging of pots and pans), they have projected images on

buildings and wall, and issues multiple graphic manifestos and designs. This is a true representation of the “broad base” of this movement.

At the same time, there are new social actors present in the demonstrations who emerge from the center of Lima and whose participation in the room where decisions are made is not permanent. I mean by that regional leaders, community groups, indigenous people, youth, and local people have been forced in their places of birth and who become in the end a social subject that gives us glimpse of another representation that goes beyond the usual official cast of characters. It is these people to whom not much attention has been paid who could nevertheless end up playing an important role in the next few years.

On the other hand we have the representation offered by Señor Manuel Serino. His cabinet, formed after two days of uncertainty and anxiety, is made up of political figures linked to the parties of former presidents Alberto Fujimori and Alan García, and to the business sector represented by the National Confederation of Private Business Institutions (CONFIEP). It is a cabinet that turned its back on the reality and the crisis that Peru is experiencing.

We state this for the following reasons. Within the Peruvian political system the irrationality of decisions and ephemeral alliances prevail. Those who direct the political parties that have a presence in the Congress are financiers of Peruvian politics who invest in taking over state positions, awarding public works, and in reducing to its minimum expression the rule of law. All of this to keep the state from meddling in their business affairs.

A clear example of this is the case of the political party *Podemos* (We Can) headed by José Luna Gálvez and his private, low-quality university Telesup, which has been doing everything in its power to to prevent the passage of a rigorous and nobel univesity reform that would prevent them from scamming young Peruvians. But he isn’t the only one who doesn’t want a univesity reform; there is also Raúl Diez Canseco, a wealthy head of universities. And then too there is César Acuña, the owner of a conglomerate of universities and boss of a political party, *Alianza para el Progreso* (Alliance for Progress).

But there interests also go beyond universities to shamelessly promote laws in favor of informal transport companies, illegal mines, churches against gender equality, the reduction of pension payments, and in general, changes in the rule of law. The end goal is to resore the old political order, of which they ceased to be a part years ago, together with impunity for the perquisites of office.

Today they wnt to use a legitimate mobilization of the Peruvian people as a kind of lottery with which they might win again. The coming to power of Merino as president of the country extends the power of Congress over the executive branch, setting up an agenda completely opposed to the Peruvian population. And so the executive branch becomes simply a subcommittee of the Congress. Everyone in Peru is aware of this.

It is in this way that Manuel Merino ends up being, in this process, the expression of a structural problem whose symptoms are political corruption and the deterioration of the relationship between politicians and the citizenry. Peru has still not been able to concretize its dream of life as a genuine republic as expressed in the classic historian Jorge Basadre and the essays of José Carlos Mariátegui.

That promise is still pending and has not materialized for various reasons. One is them has to do with the behavior of the national elites and their economic perspective on public administration. Their vision is limited to the depredation of natural resources and to the delivery of these to foreign

capital. Absent among them is any construction or management of a national project different from those that arise through politics, as well as a human outlook on the nation as a whole.

It's for that reason that when one makes comparisons with various other projects in South America–it's only necessary to compare the Peruvian case with those of Chile or Bolivia—one sees their successes. While in Chile and Bolivia the crisis of the representativity of the political parties is an open debate and with some advances in that regard, in Peru one finds high levels of corruption and a terminal crisis of the political parties. The desired reforms speak to a country that does not exist and whose framework fits much better in societies with material living conditions different from those of Peru.

The way out of this crisis that has taken place in Peru goes beyond the resignation or impeachment of Señor Manuel Merino, and neither is it to be founding Congress in political terms. In legal terms, Peru has no experience with this type of thing and therefore Constitutional /court will rule on November 18 on the legality or the illegality of the impeachment carried out against expresidnet Martín Vizcarra. That will be an historic precedent.

The citizens' discomfort demands changes and not for exchanges among the usual political actors who have at this time provoked an institutional and constitutional breakdown. Looming over this is the need for the construction of a national project that includes all and that ends putting forward legitimate representatives to carry out this popular project. There is a high level of responsibility in the progressive sectors of the country to reconstruct a new social pact based on the strongest defense of citizens' rights and the values of equality and justice.

The new correlate of this history goes beyond politics and indignation. It lacks a citizens agenda that could be a counterweight to those who defend the 105 congressional representatives who voted in favor of caos and disaster in the Peruvian government. A new promise or promises of republican life that can achieve unity in diversity and the beginning of the dismantling of the principal obstacle, that is, the Constitution of 1993, that impedes the carrying out of the urgent reforms needed by the people,.

The proposal goes beyond the constitutional debate, and should instead begin with reality itself. The pandemic has revealed the enormous precariousness and inequality in a country with natural and cultural wealth. Peru deserved to see the dream of a genuine republican life fulfilled.

Post Script: While this article was being edited, on the sixth day of protests there were reports of two youths, ages 22 and 24, killed in Lima. The Public Defender determined that both deaths were cause by projectiles fired at their faces and bodies by the Peruvian National Police. In addition, more tan a dozen people were detained, twenty young people have not been accounted for, and 17 people were wounded by the use of tear gas, pellets, or the use of force by the same police force. The social media have denounced arbitrary detentions, disappearances, and other human rights violations, as well as the use of force.

On the morning of November 15, it was reported that ten governmental ministers had resigned because of public pressure. There have also been denunciations by cultural celebrities, journalists, and scientists who have walked off their jobs. They consider the Congress' actions to be a coup d'état.

At the same time, the leadership of Congress will meet to evaluate the resignation being demanded of Mr. Manuel Merino, as well as a motion of censure presented against the representatives who make up this leadership body.

The protests do not stop, the slogan was unanimous: the resignation of Manuel Merino, the usurper president of Peru.

[Photo – Sebastian Castaneda/Reuters in Aljazeera]

Translated by Dan La Botz