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Peru

A new political moment

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On Sunday 6 June, Peruvians went to the polls to elect a president, to choose between Keiko Fujimori and Pedro Castillo. [1] Election day arrived in a polarized atmosphere. On the one hand, Fujimorism [2] and the Peruvian right – with the support of the groups in power – presented themselves as the alternative to save the country from the "communist threat". On the other hand, Castillo has the solid support of the popular sectors that, tired of the political class, are demanding fundamental changes.

We knew that the results would be tight; they had already been in 2016, when Kuczynski [3] defeated Fujimori by 42,000 votes. But unlike at that time when two right-wing projects clashed, it was the very survival of the regime that was at stake, and the elites were not ready easily to accept a victory of Pedro Castillo.

On 15 June, after 100 per cent of the ballots had been counted, the National Office for Electoral Processes (ONPE) announced that Pedro Castillo had won the election with 50.12 per cent of the vote against 49.87 per cent for Keiko Fujimori, a difference of more than 44,000 votes. Pedro Castillo could have been proclaimed president by now, but the challenge of thousands of votes by Fujimorism and the manoeuvres of the national elections jury of elections have delayed the proclamation. Fujimorism and its allies are trying to prevent the inevitable: the end of the neoliberal political cycle and the opening of a new cycle favourable to the majorities in the country.

Neoliberal Peru and the cycle that is ending (or should end)

At the beginning of 1990, Peru was in a situation of generalized crisis, laminated by hyperinflation, subversive violence and political crisis. The cycle of democratization that began in the 1960s, marked by the model of import substitution and the expansion of social and political rights enshrined in the 1979 Constitution, was disintegrating at a dizzying pace. On April 5, 1992, Fujimori's coup, with the support of the armed forces and the powerful economic groups, put an end to this cycle by authoritarian means. As in Chile in 1973, neoliberalism was imposed without any form of democracy, with strong discretionary power to nullify rights and enshrine the primacy of the market. In order to ensure the permanence of the changes, the model was constitutionalized: a new political Constitution was approved in 1993.

The neoliberal cycle took hold, taking advantage of the decline of the trade unions, popular organisations and left-wing parties, hit hard by the armed conflict and the economic crisis. This regime was consolidated, guaranteeing technocratic governance at the political level, advancing economically by liberalizing strategic sectors and, on the social level, imposing new norms exalting individualism. There was a Peruvian particularity: under the leadership of Fujimori and Montesinos [4], a corrupt mafia was set up to control the powers of the state, guaranteeing continuity and impunity.

In 2000, in view of the scale of the corruption scandals, Alberto Fujimori was dismissed from his post. But far from being weakened by the political crisis, neoliberalism took on a new lease of life, encouraged by high commodity prices on the world market. Democratically elected governments have not changed the regime or dismantled the corrupt networks of Fujimorism; on the contrary, they have strengthened the primary export model, administering the state with the same entrepreneurial logic that brought them profits.

At the same time, challenges to neoliberalism were expressed both in the socio-environmental conflicts of peasant communities and indigenous territories faced with the advance of big capital and in the electoral field, where critical choices gained ground – such as Humala in 2011 [5], even though he quickly betrayed his platform for change, and Verónica Mendoza in 2016. [6]

The hegemony of the neoliberal regime further deteriorated in 2018 with the complaints for corruption complaints related to the Odebrecht case [7]. The involvement of the entire political class in bribes, misappropriated public procurement and other crimes has led to the downfall of former presidents and local and judicial authorities, causing outrage among citizens. The resignation Kuczynski, the reorganization of the National Council of Justice, and the subsequent dissolution of Congress led to a large-scale crisis in which almost all of the state's powers collapsed.

But neoliberalism has survived, supported by two fundamental pillars: the presidential institution and social acceptance. It was the pandemic that gave the final blow on these two levels. To begin with, the impeachment of President Vizcarra in November 2020 [8] by a Congress dominated by private interests generated a massive popular response in the streets, which prevented the consolidation of a coup, while making Sagasti a precarious transitional president.

Second, the health tragedy of the pandemic (with its correlation in the economic sphere) revealed a devastated society. The disengagement of the state, the profits accumulated by clinics, the monopoly of oxygen, the bankruptcy of small businesses and the millions of informal workers who could not survive with the lockdowns, increased hunger and poverty, liquefying the social hegemony that the model maintained. The neoliberal regime imposed in 1992 has collapsed all along the line. The results of the 2021 presidential elections have confirmed this exhaustion.

What can start: a government for the majorities

Pedro Castillo won mainly thanks to the votes of Peruvians who are waiting for a change. It was also an identity vote, less ideological and more vindictive, identifying with the teacher who earns two minimum wages, who is rejected when he protests and is considered inept or dangerous. He won against economic power groups, against the media, and also against the decaying intelligentsia led by Mario Vargas Llosa, Fujimori's former enemy.

Although Castillo expanded his framework of alliances by signing an agreement with Verónica Mendoza, summoning recognized professionals, and articulating an "anti-Fujimorist" liberal sector, nothing reassured the elites, who persisted in an anti-communist crusade with fake news, racist insults, and affabulations about the catastrophe that his government would mean. Worse still, once the ONPE's vote count was over, Fujimorism and its allies deployed a coup d'état strategy that ignored the results and sought to prevent Castillo's inauguration.

While the right's despair at the imminent end of the cycle is obvious, the question now is what this new political moment will look like. One could say that another period is already emerging, marked by Castillo's trajectory, by his environment and his entourage. Unlike Humala, Castillo has a popular background, trade union experience, and left-wing sensibility, but he is also a small farmer and entrepreneur, which influences the pragmatism, negotiating skills, and sense of opportunity with which he developed and won the election campaign.

This plebeian and pragmatic profile is also evident in the circles that accompany him and could foreshadow a new cabinet. On the one hand, there is the circle of the left: Perú Libre [9], a regional left-wing party that has brought him to the presidency and which, together with Nuevo Perú [10] and other forces, will have to act in coordination to promote the implementation of the promised changes, particularly in the economy and concerning the constituent process. But there are also groups – and especially people – of various political tendencies who have approached

the schoolteacher opportunistically, taking advantage of kinship or territorial networks. They aspire, together with the sectors of the politico-business right, to neutralize the achievement of substantial changes and to take advantage of a presidential administration similar to the previous ones.

The question revolves around what actions Castillo could take to start opening a new cycle, under pressure as at the moment from a putschist right, the absence of a parliamentary majority and the centrist temptation. First of all, he will have to make sure he stays in government, by convincing those who did not vote for him as well as those who did. This implies the strengthening of a first socio-political circle of the left and progressives, open to the centre, which will also help to change the correlation of the opposing forces in Congress. [\[See Reuters 28 July 2021 \["Peru's Castillo, in first speech as president, pledges to heal colonial wounds\]\]](#) and AS/COA 3 August 2021 ["Who's Who in Pedro Castillo's Inaugural Cabinet".](#)]]

Similarly, he can strengthen himself by implementing concrete changes to improve the living conditions of the population, giving priority to health and economic reactivation with job creation. For this, it is essential to increase fiscal resources with measures such as the nationalization of gas and the tax on mining profits, which at the same time would be relevant in terms of recovering sovereignty and the national project.

It will also be essential to initiate the constituent process, involving the citizens in an initiative to collect signatures in order to consult by referendum whether or not they agree with a new Constitution resulting from a constitutional assembly. The constituent process would promote a major national debate and the discussion and approval of this new Constitution, which would hopefully be the expression of multi-national and equal representation. Moreover, it would allow the affirmation of a new cycle, with a state that guarantees rights, redistribution and social justice.

Épilogue: an interlude of monsters

Gramsci said that "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born", and that in this interregnum, monsters emerge. Precisely, today, in Peru, dangerous "monstrosities" are parading. The rise of a reactionary, racist and violent far right, similar to that of Bolsonaro in Brazil or that of Vox in Spain, should thus be taken notice of.

Although, for the second round, the (neo)liberals and the ultra-rightists joined together in their support for Fujimorism, they are once again distancing themselves. Keiko Fujimori is worn out, her links with Vladimiro Montesinos – who reappeared by giving instructions by phone from prison to change the election result – further complicates her situation. In the face of the dismay of the (neo)liberals who had linked their fate to Fujimorism, the strongest sector is the farright led by Rafael López Aliaga [\[11\]](#), which is developing in the upper classes and in the urban popular sectors of Lima by feeding on conservatism and anti-leftist harassment, exacerbated during the campaign.

On the other hand, there is the stressed population and an asphyxiating environment, fanned by Fujimorism and its allies. In parallel with the massive mobilizations of Castillo's supporters and of Fujimorism that took place for three consecutive weeks, there were violent actions of harassment against the electoral authorities, letters calling for a coup d'État by former soldiers, attacks on ronderos and teachers and finally the physical attack on the head of the ONPE.

In all this, the media played a disastrous role: this is the case of the *El Comercio* group, which has completely subordinated its editorial line to Fujimorism, and the Willax television channel, with its machinery of fake news, rigging and defamation. Social networks also functioned as a bastion of disinformation, conducive to opinion matrices imposed by power groups in order to delegitimize Castillo's triumph.

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Paving the way for a process of transformation is a difficult task. Success will depend to a large extent on the will and articulation of the political actors in government, managing alliances and counterweights with other democratic sectors, but above all aiming to consolidate a political and social base to support and defend these changes.

In a society like Peru's, with weak political parties, a fragmented social fabric, and mafias rooted in the public apparatus, state actions will be fundamental to dismantling neoliberal structures (for example, in the management of natural resources, tax reform, or the pension system run by pension funds). But state action will be insufficient if it is done at the expense of those who voted for change. It will therefore be essential to involve citizens and their various organisations – be they peasant communities, indigenous peoples, neighbourhood organisations, professional associations or others – so that they are committed to defending their rights.

This new moment is one of controversy, it is open to all eventualities. What we hope for is possible, although it may also not happen. But as Alberto Flores Galindo would say, “there is room for hope”. [12].

Lima, 29 June 2021

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[1] José Pedro Castillo Terrones comes from a poor peasant family. In his youth he was a rondero (from the name of the self-defence groups of peasants fighting against cattle rustling in the north of the country). He has been a teacher in Puña since 1995, a trade unionist and one of the leaders of the teachers' strike that lasted nearly three months in 2017. Candidate of the radical left party Perú Libre, of which he is not a member, he is expected to be sworn in as President of the Republic of Peru on 28 July 2021.

[2] Named after Alberto Fujimori, President of Peru from 1990 to 2000, who fled to Japan in the face of the challenge of his re-election in 2000, then to Chile, cited in 2004 by Transparency International as one of the ten most corrupt former heads of state, extradited from Chile in 2007 at the request of the Peruvian justice authorities, sentenced by the Lima court in 2009 to 25 years in prison for crimes against humanity and to seven and a half years for embezzlement of public funds, he was pardoned by President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski on 24 December 2017. On 3 October 2018, his pardon was annulled by Judge Hugo Nuñez and he was finally returned to prison on 24 January 2019. Other trials awaited him, including one for his policy of forced sterilization of indigenous women in the 1990s. Keiko Fujimori, a defeated candidate in the 2021 presidential election, is his daughter.

[3] Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, President of Peru (2016-2018). Accused of corruption and threatened with impeachment, he resigned from the presidency on 23 March 2018, on the eve of the Congressional vote. Arrested in 2019 in connection with the Odebrecht scandal he is under house arrest.

[4] Vladimiro Montesinos, a soldier and lawyer, headed the intelligence services under Fujimori's presidency. He was sentenced twice for crimes against humanity (each time to 25 years in prison) and for arms trafficking to 10 years in prison.

[5] Ollanta Moisés Humala Tasso, military officer, founder of the Peruvian Nationalist Party, elected against Keiko Fujimori president of Peru (2011-2016) with the support of the left at the head of the Gana Perú alliance, he pursued neoliberal policies and was imprisoned, accused of corruption, in 2017, then released a year later following a petition for habeas corpus. Candidate in 2021, he won 1.6 per cent of the vote.

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[6] Verónica Mendoza, a Franco-Peruvian psychologist, first leader of the youth of the Peruvian Nationalist Party, deputy of Gana Perú, which she left in 2012 to protest against the repression of strikers. An activist of Movimiento Sembrar (radical left), she was a presidential candidate in 2016 for the Frente Amplio (left alliance) and came third with 18.74 per cent of the vote. In 2017 she participated in the founding of the Nuevo Perú party, which she chaired. In 2021, running for president on behalf of Juntos por el Perú (feminist, anti-imperialist); she won 7.9 per cent of the vote and supported Pedro Castillo in the second round.

[7] Organização Odebrecht, founded in 1944, is a Brazilian company with a worldwide presence, which operates in construction, petrochemicals, defence and technology, transport and logistics, fuel and other sectors. In November 2014, it was at the centre of a massive corruption and money-laundering case, accused of paying at least \$3 billion to political leaders on three continents. Its CEO, Marcelo Odebrecht, was convicted in 2016 and is serving ten years in prison (reduced sentence for admitting guilt and providing evidence against other defendants).

[8] Martín Alberto Vizcarra Cornejo was Vice-President of the Republic under the presidency of Kuczynski, whom he succeeded after his resignation. Without a majority in Congress, he was repeatedly accused by the President of the Congress, Manuel Merino (right) of corruption and finally dismissed (by 105 votes in favour, 198 against and 4 abstentions) on November 9, 2020. The announcement of his impeachment led in the days that followed to large-scale demonstrations – the largest in Peru in two decades – in the capital and the country's main cities. Manuel Merino succeeded him the next day, but had to resign on November 15, 2020, giving way to Francisco Sagasti (centrist) as transitional president.

[9] Perú Libre is a left-wing political party, founded in 2007, defining itself as socialist and Marxist-Leninist and situating itself in the ideas of José Carlos Mariátegui. It is part of the Sao Paulo Forum and won 13.4 per cent of the vote in the 2021 legislative elections (37 MPs).

[10] Nuevo Perú, a radical left-wing party founded in 2017 by 500 activists and chaired by Verónica Mendoza. In the 2021 legislative elections it formed the Juntos por el Perú coalition with the Humanist Party, the Communist Party, the Communist Party of Peru-Patria Roja and the Movement for Socialism. This coalition won 6.63 per cent of the vote (5 MPs).

[11] Rafael López Aliaga, businessman, member of Opus Dei, presidential candidate of 2021 on behalf of the far-right party Popular Renewal. He won 11.75 per cent of the vote.

[12] Alberto Flores Galindo (1949-1990), Peruvian historian and left-wing journalist, who notably wrote *La agonía de Mariátegui. La polémica con la Comintern* (1980) and *Buscando un Inca: Identidad y utopía en los Andes* (1986)