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Peru: Two-way coup d'état?

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Abstract:

Peru has been in the midst of a social upheaval since last December when President Pedro Castillo staged a self-coup and was arrested and removed from office. This political suicide led to the appointment of Diana Boluarte, his vice-president, as the Andean nation's first female president.

Since then, a state of emergency has been declared throughout the country, while demonstrators demand the resignation of the president and early elections, as Congress finds itself caught in a political and institutional loop from which it does not seem to emerge.

A political reform that changes the rules of the game is urgently in need to make Peru a governable country.

Key words:

Coup d'état, crisis, instability, elections, riots, protests, Peru

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Perú: ¿Golpe de Estado de ida y vuelta?

Resumen:

Perú se encuentra envuelto en un estallido social desde que el pasado mes de diciembre el presidente Pedro Castillo diera un autogolpe de estado y acabara detenido y destituido de su cargo. Un suicidio político que desembocó en el nombramiento de Diana Boluarte, su vicepresidenta, como primera mandataria de nación andina.

Desde entonces, se declara el estado de emergencia en todo país, mientras los manifestantes piden la renuncia de la presidenta y el adelanto de elecciones, en tanto en cuanto el congreso se encuentra enroscado en un bucle político e institucional del que no parece salir.

Se necesita urgentemente una reforma política que cambie las reglas del juego para hacer de Perú un país gobernable.

Palabras clave:

Golpe de Estado, crisis, inestabilidad, elecciones, revueltas, protestas, Perú

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*You can fool all the people some of the time
and some of the people all the time, but you
cannot fool all the people all the time.*

Abraham Lincoln

Introduction

On 7 December, in little more than three hours, Pedro Castillo, the former president of Peru, ordered the dissolution of his country's parliament without the support of the armed forces, lost the presidency, left the Legislative Palace and was arrested by his own bodyguard, now facing trial for the crime of rebellion. An absurd and grotesque coup attempt that was rejected by most of the political forces, including members of his own government, and which ended up leading to a serious institutional crisis and the investiture of Vice-President Dina Boluarte as the Andean country's first female president with the support of the establishment.

Since then, Peru has been rocked by strong anti-government protests that have paralysed the country, except for a brief truce during the December holidays, with Castillo's supporters demanding his release, the closure of Congress, the calling of new elections and the resignation of President Boluarte, as well as some changes to the constitution.

In almost two months, at least 65 people have been killed by the violent response of the Armed Forces and the police to these marches, especially in the poorer rural areas of the south, and a state of emergency has been declared. The most violent day, in terms of number of victims, was Monday 9 January, when 18 people were killed and 68 civilians and 75 policemen were injured in protests in the department of Puno.

Since the activism began, human rights groups have accused the security forces of using firearms to confront protesters, as well as dropping smoke bombs from helicopters¹.

On the contrary, the army has accused protesters of using weapons and homemade explosives. The southern regions are the constant scene of road blockades, marches and clashes. Although the government decreed a state of emergency, violence continued and marches reached as far as the capital.

¹ *Perú debe investigar muertes y lesiones durante las protestas*, in: Human Rights Watch, 22-12-22. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2022/12/22/peru-debe-investigar-muertes-y-lesiones-durante-las-protestas>. (All links are active as of the closing date of this document, February 2023).

A group of demonstrators also tried to take over Arequipa airport, while the country's president accused these demonstrators of wanting to cause chaos and disorder and warned that the full force of the law would be brought down on those committing these criminal acts².

It would not be fair —without a thorough and impartial investigation— to hold the government responsible for all the deaths. There are also anti-democratic and violent attitudes among the demonstrators, such as the still unidentified mob that killed and burned a policeman in Puno; or those who have been blocking the movement of ambulances; they have attacked shopkeepers who have refused to go along with the strike, and have set fire to public buildings, to say the least³.

With the reputation of the legislature in tatters and a political crisis far from being resolved in the short term, this popular outcry is demonstrating the saturation towards a system that has failed to work for decades and calls into question the integrity of the Peruvian republic.

How did it get here?

In a serious moment of uncertainty, Peru's presidential elections in April and June 2021, with the situation unfavourable for forging broad national agreements, divided the country's political map and provoked an electoral outburst.

Pedro Castillo was a complete unknown until five years ago, in 2017, when he led an educational protest during the government of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski to demand better salaries, which lasted for almost three months. In these demonstrations, Castillo allied himself with Fujimorismo, which was trying to damage Kuczynski's government at the time. The protests ended with the resignation of the Minister of Education, Marilú Martens⁴. Even so, after these circumstances, nobody remembered him any more.

² *Boluarte acusa a los manifestantes de querer "quebrar el Estado de Derecho"*, in Página SIETE, 19-01-22. Available at: <https://www.paginasiete.bo/planeta/boluarte-acusa-a-los-manifestantes-de-querer-quebrar-el-estado-de-derecho-AY6089651#:~:text=>

³ CASTRO CAJAHUANCA, Jonathan. *El gobierno de Dina Boluarte está sacrificando a los peruanos. Su renuncia debe ser inmediata*, in: The Washington Post, 13 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2023/01/13/protestas-peru-dina-boluarte-muertos-renuncia/>

⁴ GARCÍA ARENALES, M. *Pedro Castillo, el maestro rural al que nadie vio venir en las elecciones de Perú*, in: El Diario.es 8-8-21. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/pedro-castillo-maestro-rural-nadie-vio-venir-elecciones-peru_1_8017041.html

In late 2020 Castillo was recruited by Vladimir Cerrón, a neurosurgeon and orthodox left-wing politician, former governor of Junín, a region between the Andes and the Amazon, proposing him to be the candidate of Perú Libre⁵.

Although Castillo's original objective was to run for Congress, the former regional governor offered him the second vice-presidency, as he was politically disqualified by the courts due to a corruption conviction. In the end, he had no alternative but to offer him the candidacy for Pizarro's palace. In spite of everything, Cerrón will remain close to the teachers' leader as head of the government's plan⁶.

Thus the name of this trade unionist and rural teacher came out of nowhere in the middle of the pandemic, almost without appearing in the media or in the polls and growing stealthily in provinces far from the capital, with a radical and populist discourse: "As a government, we will immediately cut the salaries of ministers and congressmen by half. We will recover the country's economy by rescuing it from this great corruption. The lifetime salaries of former presidents must be cancelled immediately, as well as the parliamentary immunity of the corrupt [...] We will remove the judges who are currently attacking the country, attacking the organisations," said Castillo in one of his speeches⁷.

In reality, Cerrón intended to create a small group in Congress that would allow him to make a political life in Lima. The leader of Perú Libre, who defines himself as a "provincial leftist", has gone so far as to say that the "caviar left" is the main enemy, even more so than the extreme right: "we do not have an alliance with the ultra-right, what we have is a spontaneous anti-caviar coincidence. We coincide because we are fighting a common enemy, which is the caviar left, social democracy⁸."

⁵ This political group, according to its programme, describes itself as a Marxist, democratic, decentralist, internationalist, inclusive, sovereign, humanist and anti-imperialist left-wing party, although many critics describe it as populist and radical, with archaic and contradictory ideas on issues related to corruption. CERRÓN ROJAS, Vladimir. *Perú Libre. Ideario y Programa*. Available at: <https://perulibre.pe/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ideario-peru-libre.pdf>

⁶ ZUBIETA PACCO, René. *Pedro Castillo: así fue la campaña del candidato de Perú Libre que surgió del campo y que Lima no vio llegar*. El Comercio, 13 June 2021. Available at: <https://elcomercio.pe/elecciones-2021/pedro-castillo-asi-fue-la-campana-del-candidato-de-peru-libre-que-surgio-del-campo-y-que-lima-no-vio-llegar-resultados-oficiales-elecciones-2021-noticia/?ref=ecr>

⁷ TAGLIONI, Augusto. *Sorpresa en Perú: ganó un sindicalista de izquierda y habrá segunda vuelta con Keiko Fujimori*. LaPolíticaOnline, 11-04-2021. Available at: <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/133321-sorpresa-en-peru-gano-un-sindicalista-de-izquierda-y-habra-segunda-vuelta/>

⁸ INFOBAE. *Vladimir Cerrón aseguró que su principal enemigo es la "izquierda caviar": "Podemos coincidir con el fujimorismo."* 21-02-2022. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/peru/2022/08/21/vladimir-cerron-aseguro-que-su-principal-enemigo-es-la-izquierda-caviar-podemos-coincidir-con-el-fujimorismo/>

The first election results showed how the vote to punish the ruling party was energetically exercised, but it was not a right-wing or left-wing problem, it was a problem of repudiation of the parties in general.

It is important to underline that since 2000 corruption has affected six Peruvian presidents. In the previous legislature, four presidents passed through the government palace, three of them in the same week, clashes between the executive and the congress prevented governability and unleashed a social crisis. All this has naturally led to a widespread rejection of the political class.

The idea of change repeatedly betrayed is what made people focus on the proposals for change and not necessarily on the quality of the change. Peruvians have seen how in the last 20 years all elected presidents have arrived with a discourse of transformation that in the end they have not fulfilled, adapting to a corrupt system that time and again provokes the disappointment of ordinary citizens.

With a very low level of acceptance of the different candidacies presented in 2021, Peru Libre —the most voted party thanks to the pull of candidate Pedro Castillo— only obtained 18.9%, while Keiko Fujimori and her Fuerza Popular, barely reached 13.4%, in the first round⁹. It is a case of fragmentation brought to its ultimate consequences.

Infighting within a political class widely regarded as criminally venal has alienated ordinary Peruvians to the point where half of them no longer “support” democracy, the third lowest level in Latin America, behind only ultra-violent Honduras and ever-troubled Haiti.

Although we should not really be surprised by this electoral crisis, which is heavily influenced by the political practice of the so-called “surrogate parties”, a pejorative term in Peruvian politics used to describe people who join a party, not because they are like-minded, but to get into public office and thus benefit from the power granted to them, forgetting their political principles¹⁰.

⁹ Renovación Popular 11.75%, Alianza País-Partido de Integración Social 11.62%, Acción Popular 9.07 %, Junta por el Perú 7.86%, Alianza para el Progreso 6.02 %, Victoria Nacional 5.65% and Others 15.685. *ONPE. Elecciones Generales y Parlamento Andino 2021.* Available at: <https://resultadoshistorico.onpe.gob.pe/EG2021/EleccionesPresidenciales/RePres/T>

¹⁰ *Elecciones 2021: ¿Qué son los partidos 'vientre de alquiler' y cómo influyen en la crisis electoral?* 11-12-20, in: *El poder en tus manos.* Available at: <https://rpp.pe/politica/elecciones/elecciones-2021-que-son-los-partidos-vientre-de-alquiler-y-como-influyen-en-la-crisis-electoral-el-poder-en-tus-manos-noticia-1309241?ref=rpp>

In light of these results, it was already clear that Peruvian politics would continue along the same lines as in the last decade: fragmented and polarised. It was precisely these characteristics that led to the growing political crisis in recent years.

Consequently, the outlook for the second round was that of a weak and inconsistent candidate, Pedro Castillo, supported by anti-Fujimorism and with a Marxist but socially conservative discourse: against policies such as abortion, gay marriage and gender equality.

The profile of the Peruvian who supports the radical change promised by Castillo is that of the highlands, of the provinces that have felt the government's neglect for many years, a protesting voter, who demands more or less immediate satisfaction from the state and who expresses their discomfort at the impossibility of resolving historical problems. It goes against the elite, considering that only a person with a humble profile and peasant background could represent them against the privileged minority in Lima.

At the other end of the political spectrum is the right-wing Keiko Fujimori¹¹, claiming the legacy of her father, the controversial former president Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a sentence for crimes against humanity. She represents voters in the capital, the exporting coast and part of the Amazon, which has benefited over the years from better economic development. That is why her followers support Fujimori's daughter's continuist system based on capitalism. Two opposing models for a country divided, initially more by geographical location than by affiliation.

The health crisis was also one of the triggers that led Peruvian society to choose between two antagonistic systems. The pandemic highlighted unequal access to institutions such as health and education.

Peru is the country in the world with the highest number of deaths reported by COVID-19 per 1,000 inhabitants, with 6 deaths, almost three times the average for the region, and with the lockdowns exacerbating unemployment, leading to rising levels of inequality.

Although Latin America and the Caribbean is generally a region characterised by high levels of inequality, the largest increases in poverty occurred in Argentina, Colombia and Peru¹².

¹¹ Keiko came to the elections with open court cases for alleged illegal financing of her previous electoral campaigns.

¹² *Panorama Social de América Latina 2021*. CEPAL. Naciones Unidas. 2022. Available at: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/47718/1/S2100655_es.pdf

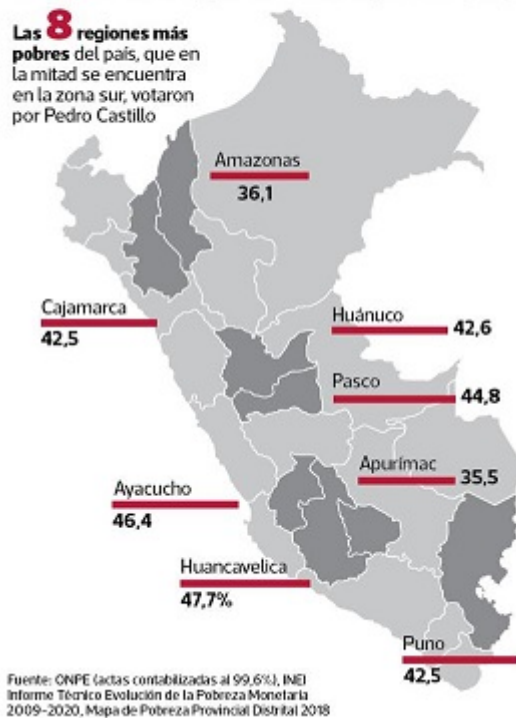
With the pandemic, a precariousness that had dragged on for decades became more evident. More than half of Peruvians (60%) believe that the gap between rich and poor has increased in their country in the last two years. On the other hand, only 15% consider that it has decreased¹³.

Against this backdrop, the run-off election between the left-wing candidate and the right-wing candidate was very close, an agonising recount, with a disputed margin right down to the last vote and six weeks of waiting. In the end, Castillo beat Fujimori by a razor-thin margin of 44,000 votes, partly thanks to the rejection of the Fujimori name by half the country.

Some think that rather than an ideological vote, Peru's shift to the extreme left was due to a question of identity, because many rural people saw in Professor Castillo a reflection of their lives. In rural communities, the teacher's word is worth more than that of any politician, and parents and students see in this figure a leader whom they respect and admire. The role that teachers assume as educators is first of all to live with the population and to be the managers of all the activities that they want to develop in the community, being the ones who guarantee all the management of the authorities of a given community. This could explain Castillo's support in the most neglected areas, although there is no shortage of detractors who have blamed the result on a question of ignorance.

¹³ | National Inequalities Perception Survey. (ENADES 2022). Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), July 2022. Commissioned by OXFAM. Available at: https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/peru.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/1%20Encuesta%20nacional%20de%20percepci%C3%B3n%20de%20desigualdades-ENADES%202022-v2.pdf

El mapa electoral según los índices de pobreza (2020)



Source: El Comercio

Without political experience and without a clear project, Castillo assumed the presidency (28 July 2021) framed in the celebration of the bicentenary of Peru’s independence, inaugurating a new stage in a country plagued by epidemics and with a collapsed economy; the steepest fall in the region.

In his first speeches, the president announced a series of social measures, especially in health and education, and although he was cautious, he remained firm on certain reforms, a new constitution, and a series of structural modifications that needed a constituent assembly to carry them out¹⁴.

Among other things, these reforms implied a change in the Peruvian economic model, an idea he repeated in his campaign: “no more poor people in a rich country”¹⁵. To achieve this, it was necessary for what he calls the “people’s economy with markets” to be implemented.

¹⁴ TV Perú. Noticias. *El presidente Pedro Castillo ofreció un mensaje a la nación ante el Congreso de la República*. 28 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.tvperu.gob.pe/noticias/nacionales/lea-aqui-el-mensaje-a-la-nacion-del-presidente-pedro-castillo>

¹⁵ FOWKS, Jacqueline. *La campaña contra Pedro Castillo se intensifica en Perú*, in: El País, 10-05-21. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-09/la-campana-contra-pedro-castillo-se-intensifica-en-peru.html>

In recent decades Peru has followed a liberal economic model in which the state plays a secondary role and promotes free competition. This model has produced good macroeconomic results, with sustained growth that has allowed the country to multiply its GDP tenfold over the last 30 years, but it has not been able to benefit all Peruvians equally¹⁶.

The key change in Castillo's proposal lay in the role that the state would have to play, since in the so-called popular economy it is not the market that rules but the state. This government plan, inspired by some points of the economic plan implemented by Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, formulates a more interventionist government, nationalising companies, ending the funded pension model, punishing imports and suspending free trade agreements, among other issues.

But for his most ambitious promises he did not have it easy, and so he had to rally support, with his paltry victory. In these conditions, his main challenge was to obtain the necessary margin to govern in the face of a divided Congress, whose majority he did not control, and a highly fragmented legislature, in which his party had only 37 of the 130 members of Congress.

This system of a unicameral parliament, established in Fujimori's 1993 constitution, generates profound political distortions in the event that the president does not have a strong bench in Congress. Castillo therefore faced a balancing act, for if he tried to please the half that did not elect him, he risked losing the backing of the far-left party that supported him in the presidency. It was a struggle between a president with weak parliamentary support and a Congress with a tough opposition. Moreover, Castillo's narrow victory and his party's weakness in congress made it easier for the opposition to forge a narrative that the elections had been fraudulent, further fomenting polarisation, controversy and damaging the already deteriorated image of democracy.

The spectre of Castro-Chavismo also hung over the executive in the form of accusations from some right-wing leaders, but the former rural schoolteacher claimed he would not imitate any political model.

¹⁶ OLMO, Guillermo. *3 razones por las que la economía de Perú sigue creciendo pese a las constantes crisis políticas en el país*, in: BBC News, 22 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63630153>

His initial moves were viewed with a magnifying glass, and with the appointment of Guido Bellido as prime minister, the first crisis was unleashed without the opposition lifting a finger. The more moderate sector that surrounded Castillo rejected Bellido, who was questioned for allegedly apologising for terrorism and for publishing homophobic and misogynistic messages on his social networks¹⁷.

Peru into the abyss

But this would only be the beginning. Since coming to power, he faced several government crises that forced him to repeatedly replace his cabinet, appointing five different and nearly 80 ministers, an exaggerated rotation that would make it virtually impossible to implement one line of government.

He himself was not exempt from scandals either, with serious accusations, he was denounced by the prosecutor's office for allegedly leading a criminal organisation to enrich himself through state contracts and obstructing investigations¹⁸. In total, the former president is under investigation for six different offences, including influence peddling, irregular contracting, bribery and even aggravated plagiarism and generic falsehood, among other possible offences¹⁹. It was the culmination of months of headlines about alleged irregularities and wrongdoing in his entourage.

Castillo denied all the accusations, arguing that there was no evidence against him and that this constitutional complaint²⁰ was a new form of coup d'état in Peru.

Likewise, since he did not have a strong parliamentary group, as we have already mentioned, the president could be immersed in a process of *vacancy due to moral incapacity* established in Article 113 of the Constitution²¹, as would later happen, although

¹⁷ ÁLVAREZ, M. Isabel. *Guido Bellido: misoginia, homofobia y radicalismo marcó su pensamiento en redes sociales*, in: El Comercio, 31/08/2021. [Online]. Available at: <https://elcomercio.pe/politica/gobierno/guido-bellido-misoginia-homofobia-y-radicalismo-marco-su-pensamiento-en-redes-sociales-peru-libre-pedro-castillo-vladimir-cerron-sendero-luminoso-noticia/>

¹⁸ GÓMEZ VEGA, Renzo. *La Fiscalía de Perú denuncia al presidente Pedro Castillo y lo acusa de liderar una organización criminal*, in: El País, 12 October 2022. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-10-12/la-fiscalia-de-peru-denuncia-al-presidente-pedro-castillo-y-lo-acusa-de-liderar-una-organizacion-criminal.html>

¹⁹ These are in addition to the charges of rebellion and conspiracy for the self-coup.

²⁰ In Peru, the constitutional complaint is a special procedure that is capable of overriding presidential immunity.

²¹ *Vacancia presidencial por incapacidad moral: ¿qué significa y en qué casos se puede dar?* In: Infobae, 18-09-21. Available at: [https://www.infobae.com/americas/peru/2021/11/19/vacancia-presidencial-por-incapacidad-moral-que-significa-y-en-que-casos-se-puede-dar/#:~:text="](https://www.infobae.com/americas/peru/2021/11/19/vacancia-presidencial-por-incapacidad-moral-que-significa-y-en-que-casos-se-puede-dar/#:~:text=)

he was able to survive the first two vacancy attempts, accusing the legislature of political persecution and assuring that he would remain in office until the end of his term.

The result of all these ups and downs was 200 political scandals in less than 500 days. In short, like his predecessors in office, a constant defensive posture that prevented him from fulfilling his main electoral promises. Castillo's primary purpose was to stay afloat in the face of opposition attacks in Congress, internal disputes in his coalition and public pressure. In the end, it could be said that the former trade unionist, rather than changing the system, ended up conforming to it.

And so the day came when Castillo blew up his presidency. Without the constitutional capacity to do so, shortly before a third impeachment attempt began, he announced the dissolution of congress, the installation of a government of exception, a curfew and the reorganisation of the judiciary, in what many, including the country's own constitutional court, described as an attempted coup d'état²²: "We took the decision to establish a government of emergency aimed at re-establishing the rule of law and democracy. [...] As of today and until the new Congress of the Republic is installed, we will govern by means of decree laws [...] for more than 16 months we have been engaged in a continuous and stubborn campaign of relentless attacks on the presidential institution, a situation never before seen in Peruvian history²³."

At the end of his speech, both the first minister and nine other members of the cabinet resigned. For their part, the country's main institutions, i.e. the congress, the judiciary, the army and the police, have all stated that under no circumstances would they abide by the president's plan.

The congress dismissed Castillo while he was already formally detained. The questions we should be asking here are why this subversion failed and why it lasted barely three hours.

²² *Crisis política en Perú, en vivo: Pedro Castillo fue detenido tras un fallido autogolpe de Estado y asumió la vicepresidencia* in: LA NACION 7-12-22. Available at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/crisis-politica-en-peru-pedro-castillo-cierra-el-congreso-y-anuncia-que-gobernara-por-decreto-nid07122022/#:~:text=>

²³ *Golpe de estado: Este es el mensaje de Pedro Castillo tras la disolución del Congreso*, in L Latina. 7-12-22. Available at: <https://www.latina.pe/noticias/latina-noticias/golpe-de-estado-este-es-el-mensaje-de-pedro-castillo-tras-la-disolucion-del-congreso>

The truth is that the Peruvian president's strategy was as incompetent as his government was; a man utterly overtaken by events.

After three vacancy proceedings in barely 16 months, while Pedro Castillo was being tried for rebellion and perhaps also for conspiracy, Peru had a new president, Dina Boluarte; the first woman president in 200 years of independence.

The new head of the executive marked a distance and was very clear in her condemnation of her former political partner: "there has been an attempted coup d'état, an imprint promoted by Mr Pedro Castillo, which I have not found today with the institutions of democracy and in the street, this Congress of the Republic has taken a decision in accordance with the constitutional mandate, and it is my duty to act accordingly." Although at the time it seems that she did not remember her own words, pronounced a year earlier, assuring that she would resign if Castillo was voted out of office by Congress, and stating her opposition to the attempts to remove the now ex-president from office²⁴.

Boluarte asked parliament for a political truce and promised to establish a broad-based government of national unity in which all political forces would be represented, something that was apparently welcomed by the different groups: "this is no time for ideologies or right or left, president Boluarte we wish you success in forming a government of national unity," announced Keiko Fujimori on her Twitter account²⁵.

However, the new president faced practically the same problems as Castillo, including an investigation for money laundering, and her problems could even end up being worse because her profile is much more ideological, and much more to the extreme left, in the face of a deeply conservative congress.

Shortly after Boluarte was sworn in, there was unrest among part of the population. Hundreds of demonstrators arrived in the centre of Lima protesting against Pedro Castillo with slogans calling him "corrupt", while others demanded the closure of the congress, the removal of the president from office and support for the leftist leader.

²⁴ *Dina Boluarte y el día que aseguró que renunciaría si Pedro Castillo era vacado por el Congreso*, in INFOBAE, 7-12-22. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/peru/2022/12/07/dina-boluarte-y-el-dia-que-aseguro-que-renunciaria-si-pedro-castillo-era-vacado-por-el-congreso/>

²⁵ KeikoFujimori. 7-12-22. 1 March 2022, 22:31 p. m., [Tweet]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/KeikoFujimori/status/1600603956702547972?s=20&t=Oe2AJl1Mf2SqPckf0BQjQA>

Social unrest erupted and spread like wildfire, especially in the south of the country: Puno, Apurímac, Ayacucho, Cuzco and Arequipa. This led to fierce clashes with the security forces, who did not hesitate to crack down hard on these protests.



Demonstrators protesting in the streets. Source: © REUTERS / Sebastian Castaneda

Protesters closed roads, seized airports, stormed the judiciary, spreading chaos throughout the country. The response of the armed forces and the police was sometimes excessive, resulting in the deaths of many people and hundreds of injuries. The first death of a demonstrator resulted in the burning of the Huancabamba police station in the department of Piura. We cannot ignore the fact that in these regions, rather than polarisation, what exists is a political abyss. Castillo's lead in the elections, as mentioned above, exceeded 82%. But beyond this identity-based component, as the demonstrations show, there are other underlying reasons. These are regions that have been historically neglected, and in some areas the poverty rate is well above the national average: the poorest districts are located in the department of Cuzco, and there are cities where extreme poverty can reach more than 80% of the population. Apurímac is another critical region where poverty reaches 70% of the population, and in the department of Puno poverty reaches 60%, while in Ayacucho it is 36%²⁶.

²⁶ Comex Perú. *Los departamentos más pobres a nivel multidimensional y su avance en la ejecución de la inversión pública* in: *Seminario 1144, Economía*. 18 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.comexperu.org.pe/articulo/los-departamentos-mas-pobres-a-nivel-multidimensional-y-su-avance-en-la-ejecucion-de-inversion-publica#:~:text=>

These figures reveal the deep divisions that exist between the urban elite, largely concentrated in Lima which, since its foundation 488 years ago, has distanced itself from the provinces; and the poor rural areas, with the perception that the only thing that matters in the country is the capital and that they have been relegated.

This partly explains, as we have been analysing, the echo of Castillo's campaign slogan of "no more poor people in a rich country" —the simple and powerful equation of the message that worked so well for Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998— in an area that has become the epicentre of the political and social crisis in Peru.

In an attempt to calm tempers, the president announced —on 14 December— her intention to propose to the legislature that elections be brought forward to April 2024, although her initial intention had been to run the legislature until 2026. At the same time, she declared a state of emergency in the areas of high social conflict (Apurímac, Arequipa and Ica), and later declared it nationwide, as it was very difficult to contain the security situation.

Protests and violence have continued to escalate across the country. In some areas the protests are organised peacefully and the "repression", so to speak, is legal. In others the protest has become very violent, criminal and illegitimate, so that unfortunately the "repression" is also not in accordance with the law.

The climate is so violent that in one day alone 18 protesters were killed in clashes with the police in the city of Juliaca, in the Puno region, after the protests resumed on 4 January after the Christmas break. At Arequipa airport, just hours earlier, a mob tried to take it by force. Prime Minister Alberto Otárola was quick to denounce these events, accusing 2,000 demonstrators of having carried out an organised attack on the police. "It was an organised, systematic attack of vandalism and violent activities against institutions in Puno²⁷."

At the same time, Boluarte showed little empathy during a public event after learning of the deaths in Juliaca: "They are protesting against what, we don't understand what they are asking for (...) What you are asking for is a pretext for further chaos. The Public Prosecutor's Office opened a preliminary investigation against the leader and members

²⁷ *Mueren al menos 18 personas en el sur de Perú durante protestas para exigir nuevas elecciones y la liberación de Pedro Castillo*, in: BBC News Mundo, 10-1-23. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-64218613>

of her cabinet for the alleged crimes of genocide, aggravated homicide and serious injury²⁸ as protests and roadblocks continue in several areas of the country.

Castillo's supporters argue that Dina was not elected by the people, and continue to demand new elections and the closure of congress, even going so far as to call for the release of the former president, who they see as a victim of a "corrupt" congress that did not let him govern.

For her part, the president does not seem to want to meet the demands of Castillo's supporters, claiming that the protests are being induced by radical groups with their own political agenda, and that they are financed by who knows who. She insists that it is the protesters themselves who have been responsible for the violence in the country. And even if she apologises and claims to want to defend the 33 million Peruvians, she would only be willing to bring forward the elections and continue to support the forces of law and order to take control of Peru.

These protests are unprecedented in this nation and have become the worst political violence in more than two decades. Although Peruvians are used to an abundance of social conflicts, almost all of them are associated with sectoral rather than political issues: socio-environmental, labour, border, etc. On occasion, however, they tend to break out in isolation, and are usually drowned out in negotiations at national or local government working tables. But this is one of the few moments, if we exclude the attempt to overthrow President Vizcarra, in which the agenda is completely political, spread over several regions.

Since Thursday, 19 January, the complaints have largely moved to Lima, to once again demand the resignation of the president, the congress announced that it would remain closed as a preventive measure.

With a slogan that was already a warning in itself, the "taking of Lima", the protest called by various organisations and collectives concentrated on emblematic sites in the city such as the campus of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos—which was to be violently evicted—the Juana Alarco Park and the Plaza San Martín, one of the most

²⁸ *La Fiscalía de Perú abre investigación preliminar contra la presidenta Dina Boluarte por "genocidio" tras las muertes en las protestas*, in: BBC News Mundo, 11-01-23. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-64232156>

representative places in Lima, where a devastating fire broke out in a three-storey building; the origin of which has yet to be discovered²⁹.

If the protesters' demands are maintained and the president does not resign, we are facing a game that it seems neither side can win, as the strategist Karl von Clausewitz would say, "conflicts are resolved by consensus or by violence."

Voters, analysts and business leaders say the key to ending the unrest is to hold new elections quickly. Congress initially supported moving the scheduled 2026 vote to April 2024, but there is growing pressure to hold the elections this year.

However, with a highly fragmented Congress, lawmakers are finding it difficult to agree on new legislation that would allow the country to hold elections in 2023.

Law 31355³⁰, a law that de facto breaks the balance of power between the government and congress, has a lot to do with this crisis. The law regulates the mechanism of the question of confidence and establishes that the executive can use this mechanism for "matters directly related to the implementation of its general government policy", and therefore prohibits it in cases related to the approval of constitutional reforms or other issues that affect the exclusive and exclusive competences of parliament.

Setting a timetable for new elections might calm the protests, but even that might not solve Peru's long-term political problems.

A few days ago, after more than eight hours of debate, the Peruvian Congress rejected the constitutional reform, with 45 votes in favour, 65 votes against, from both right-wing and left-wing parties, and two abstentions. Some members of Congress even openly expressed their disagreement with retiring before 2026, as they could not be re-elected by constitutional mandate³¹.

²⁹ *Incendio en Plaza San Martín: así quedó el edificio siniestrado durante protestas de la 'Toma de Lima'* in: Infobae, 20-1-23. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2023/01/20/incendio-en-plaza-san-martin-asi-queda-el-edificio-siniestrado-durante-protestas-de-la-toma-de-lima/>

³⁰ Diario Oficial El Peruano. LAW No. 31355. Available at: <https://busquedas.elperuano.pe/normaslegales/ley-que-desarrolla-el-ejercicio-de-la-cuestion-de-confianza-ley-n-31355-2003559-1/>

³¹ *El Congreso de Perú rechaza adelantar las elecciones a octubre de 2023* in: RTVE/AGENCIAS, 28-1-23. Available at: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20230128/congreso-peruano-rechaza-adelantar-elecciones-para-octubre-2023/2418786.shtml>

This constitutional amendment would have allowed the elections to be brought forward to December of this year, as Boluarte had proposed, urging parliamentarians to give the green light to bring forward the elections, and this would have been the first step towards reducing the crisis and the level of violence.

The president expressed her displeasure and regretted the events, pointing out that it was personal and partisan interests in the chamber that prevented her from seeking a way out of the serious situation.

This decision continued to fuel the mobilisations and thousands of people once again marched through the streets of Lima, mainly from the southern regions of the country, maintaining their pressure on the government. They continue to demand a Constituent Assembly, an election for an Assembly to change the constitution.

Unexpectedly, the president in a speech, which would have been unimaginable just a few weeks ago, changed her tone compared to her previous statements, and insisted on a total abolition of the 1993 Constitution, which was enacted during the Fujimori government³².

Finally, Congress postponed for the third time the debate and vote on a bill to bring forward general elections to October this year, a proposal that includes presidential and legislative elections³³. There seems to be no immediate consensus after so many days of futile debate.

The latest attempt we have heard of was Peru Libre's initiative to hold the general elections next July and include a consultation on a constituent assembly, a proposal that once again came to nothing.

In the end Congress shelved the bill presented by the government for the next session starting in July. Eleven deputies of the Constitution Committee voted in favour of the bill, ten voted against and one abstained³⁴.

³² GÓMEZ VEGA, Renzo. *Presidente de Perú ofrece elecciones anticipadas y reformas de la Constitución de 1993*, in El País, 30-1-23. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-01-30/boluarte-quiere-adelantar-las-elecciones-en-peru-a-octubre-y-cambiar-la-constitucion-de-1993.html>

³³ *El Congreso de Perú no se pone de acuerdo y posterga por tercera vez el debate sobre el adelanto de elecciones*, in: Clarín Mundo, 31-1-23. Available at: https://www.clarin.com/mundo/congreso-peru-pone-acuerdo-posterga-tercera-vez-debate-adelanto-elecciones_0_ce906b5Qll.html

³⁴ QUISPE SÁNCHEZ, Diego. *Congreso: archivaron el último proyecto para adelantar elecciones*, in: La República, 4-1-23. Available at: <https://larepublica.pe/politica/congreso/2023/02/04/congreso-archivaron-el-ultimo-proyecto-adelanto-de-elecciones-dina-boluarte-jne-210448>

Economic implications

Meanwhile, the deaths and violent protests are having a huge impact on the country's economy and their effects are already being felt in various economic sectors. This only deepens the crisis that was already being suffered due to the lack of direction during Castillo's term in office, and this obviously has negative repercussions.

Peru is a major world producer of minerals such as copper, gold, silver, lead and zinc, so the mining sector has an important share in the economy, with a high level of foreign investment. According to data from the Ministry of Energy and Mines, Peru is the world's second largest producer of copper and silver and the world's sixth largest producer of gold³⁵. The main mineral-producing regions in the country include Arequipa and Apurímac, the latter being one of the poorest in the country and also where the most brutal protests have taken place.

The Peruvian economy, considered one of the models in Latin America, had already been suffering in recent years. This is compounded by external factors in an internationalised economy such as the Peruvian one. The war in Ukraine has driven up food, fertiliser and fuel prices, pushing year-on-year inflation to 8.81% in June³⁶.

It is obvious that political instability affects investor confidence, adding uncertainty to the country's economy and banking system, which could weaken assets and reduce the profitability of institutions beyond what is expected, according to the credit rating agency Fitch Ratings³⁷, a deterioration of the operating environment for Peruvian banks in 2023, reducing growth expectations to around 2.5 %.

Due to the protests, several mining and mineral export companies have also stopped production, largely because of the dismissal of their workers. The indignation of the indigenous population in these areas is also directed against those who exploit the mines

³⁵ Ministry of Energy and Mines. Peru: Mining country. Available at: <https://www.minem.gob.pe/detalle.php?idSector=1&idTitular=159&idMenu=sub149&idCateg=159>

³⁶ Central Reserve Bank of Peru. Inflation Report. Current outlook and macroeconomic projections 2022-2023. September 2022. Available at: <https://www.bcrp.gob.pe/docs/Publicaciones/Reporte-Inflacion/2022/setiembre/reporte-de-inflacion-setiembre-2022.pdf>

³⁷ Reuters. *Fitch advierte sobre impacto de crisis política en sistema bancario de Perú*, in: La Nación, 15-12-22. Available at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/agencias/fitch-advierde-sobre-impacto-de-crisis-politica-en-sistema-bancario-de-peru-nid15122022/>

since, according to these peoples, it is only a minority who get rich, while the rural population faces a huge problem of environmental pollution.

Similarly, weeks of road blockades have begun to cause shortages of basic commodities, especially fuel and food. In addition, the tourism sector, an important source of income for Peru, continues to be paralysed by the demonstrations, with losses estimated at some 6 million dollars a day. In the hotel sector, it is estimated that in cities such as Cuzco, 80% of reservations were cancelled for this season.

Although the economic losses are difficult to quantify, the shortages and price rises in some parts of the country are being increasingly felt.

Economy and Finance Minister Alex Contreras claimed this month that the losses caused by the protests had already reached 300 million soles, some 78 million dollars, just as Central Bank Governor Julio Velarde, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, warned that the crisis could “affect not only economic growth but also inflation” and contribute to a rise in food prices³⁸.

But in spite of everything, the economy continues to function as it has done in other moments of political crisis, as if it had become accustomed to resisting whatever happens in the lower echelons of power, although the times when Peru was considered the economic locomotive of Latin America and a firm candidate to become a regional power are long gone.

Conclusion

The Peruvian political system has shipwrecked Castillo's government, helped by the failures, lurches and lack of direction of an executive more concerned with survival than with governing, which has ended up falling prey to its own ambition for power. Peru's problem was not only Castillo before, nor Boluarte now, but above all the persistent political catastrophe that the country has been dragging along. It is a kleptocratic system, in which there is no sense of unity or of nationhood; all those who come to govern seem to have the sole intention of enriching themselves.

³⁸ D. OLMO, Guillermo. *Del cierre indefinido de Machu Picchu al bloqueo de minas: el impacto económico de las protestas en Perú*, in: *BBC News*. 24-12-2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-643%645>

It would not be unreasonable to say that Peruvian politicians are united by an implicit agreement of mutual protection, which is why it is easy for them to change causes and alternate between parties, using anecdote, impasse and the occasional complaint to the public prosecutor's office as their only means of differentiation³⁹.

This model brings together all the problems of Latin American presidentialism, leading to a firebomb that has materialised in the succession of six presidents in the last five years and practically all of them, since Fujimori's time, have been prosecuted for corruption: Fujimori is in jail for this and for crimes against humanity, Alan García ended his life in 2019 when he was being detained in the wake of the Odebrecht scandal⁴⁰. Alejandro Toledo, a refugee in the United States, is wanted with an extradition request. Ollanta Humala and Kuczynski are currently being prosecuted, and now Castillo, who in addition to the corruption investigations also faces the possible crime of rebellion.

Congress has virtually refused to work loyally, grabbing more and more power to the point where the executive is becoming an irrelevant actor, as we have already discussed, and Law 31355 has a lot to do with this.

President Dina Boluarte, who will be in office for two months on 7 February, is currently part of the problem. She heads a tremendously weak executive that would need a political truce to stop a period of ungovernability that is too long. But in the current situation of social unrest and with most of the country in a state of emergency, it does not seem feasible that she will be able to reach a consensus with all actors for a total restructuring of the political system.

We will have to wait and see whether she manages to bring forward the general elections to this year or whether, on the contrary, the collapse will force her to resign, giving way to a new scenario of institutional crisis. Some think that her resignation would not fix anything, probably not, but perhaps it would calm the demonstrators and allow a new consensus to be built in Congress with a view to holding elections with certain guarantees.

³⁹ TOLEDO OROZCO, ZARAI. *Una guía para entender el Perú de Pedro Castillo* in: NUSO Nueva Sociedad Nº 295 / September-October 2021. Available at: <https://nuso.org/articulo/una-guia-para-entender-el-peru-de-pedro-castillo/>

⁴⁰ This corruption case involved 12 Latin American countries.

Another problem would be that with Boluarte's "abdication", the presidency would have to be occupied by the current president of Congress, José Williams Zapata. A former extreme right-wing military officer with a dark past, he was prosecuted for the massacre of 69 peasants in the Andean region of Ayacucho, and although he was eventually acquitted, the court ruling was highly controversial. In fact, there are already calls for a motion of censure against him so that, in the event of the president's resignation, it will not be William who takes office.

In some media, the possibility of other candidates appearing on the Peruvian political scene has been raised, such as Antauro Humala, brother of former president Ollanta Humala, who has just been released from prison after 18 years, accused of rebellion for the "Andahualizo" mutiny⁴¹. He is the leader and founder of the ethnocacerista movement, an ultra-nationalist movement that claims Peruvian identity. Consequently, it does not seem likely that an extremist candidate, considered a danger to Peru's security, will have much traction.

The deep divisions in Peruvian society and the fractured political system make it difficult to imagine the emergence of a political force that can tackle all these problems. And that is precisely what makes the current situation so difficult to resolve.

Uncertainty is widespread, and with unstoppable discontent in the streets it seems unlikely that President Boluarte will be able to unite Peruvians or win the battle in Congress to overcome the political instability that has taken such a firm hold on the Andean republic.

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⁴¹ So called because it took place in the city of Andahuaylas, in Apurímac. Antauro, with 150 supporters, stormed the police station in this city.