

Peru: Preparing for a right wing coup?

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The second round of Peru's presidential elections was held on 6 June. In the first round, at the beginning of April, the "left" outsider Pedro Castillo gained 18.9 percent and the establishment candidate, Keiko Fujimori, who had been badly hit by corruption allegations, 13.4 percent, both well ahead of all other candidates. In the run-off between the two, Castillo ended up just 40,000 votes ahead of Fujimori (out of over 18 million voters). This narrow margin led to a review by the National Electoral Tribunal. While understandable in itself, the time taken for this "review", more than a month, together with the mobilisations of the right, suggests that something deeper is going on.

The situation before the presidential election

The presidential election took place in the context of an extremely acute crisis. Firstly, declining economic growth, falling exports and growing debts were already leading to an economic crisis, when Corona pandemic struck. Secondly, this then led to an enormous social crisis. The informal sector rose from 75 percent of the population, already high for Latin America, to almost 90 percent. One third of the population is now living in extreme poverty. Particularly in the rural areas inhabited by indigenous people, but also in the poor districts of the capital Lima, there is a precarious supply situation for almost everything. Thirdly, the health system has practically collapsed in the pandemic. With almost 200,000 dead in a population of 32 million, Peru has the highest Corona casualty rate per capita in the world. Many fled the cities, further worsening the situation in the countryside.

Fourth, Peru has been in a severe political crisis for several years. The last 5 years have seen 4 different presidents and two congressional elections. The political institutions are blocking each other. Mass protests against corrupt and incompetent governments have alternated with impeachment proceedings and parliamentary dissolutions, sometimes on a weekly basis. Practically all traditional parties are either discredited or in the process of reforming.

The Left

In 2011, a so-called leftist, the ex-officer Ollanta Humala, was elected president against Keiko Fujimori. When he stood for election in 2006, Humala cited the "Bolivarian revolutions" as his model, in 2011 he cited Brazil's social democratic president, Lula da Silva. However, the promises to nationalise mining and expand the social system were not followed by anything - except that, since the end of his term, Humala has been embroiled in a serious corruption trial involving the Brazilian Odebrecht company. Meanwhile, the left-wing nationalist Union for Peru, UPP, as well as the traditional Peruvian party of left-wing nationalism, the American People's Revolutionary Alliance, APRA, have both been discredited and pushed to the margins of the political scene.

Since 2013, the "Frente Amplio" (Broad Front) has become the strongest parliamentary force on the left. It was formed as an alliance of the communist party, several social democratic and green parties as well as

left-bourgeois groups. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, it won 20 of 130 seats in Congress. Its best-known leaders were the socialist Verónica Mendoza and the priest and environmental activist Marco Arana. Arana's attempt to effectively transform the Front into a Green Party led by him, split this electoral bloc. In 2021, the socialist-oriented parties formed new electoral alliances and contested as "Together for Peru", JPP, with 7.8 percent for Mendoza as their top candidate, she had received over 18 percent in the 2016 election.

Surprisingly, however, the hitherto relatively unknown Perú Libre (Free Peru) party established itself as the strongest "left" force in 2021. This party was originally the creation of a provincial governor, Vladimir Cerrón, who wanted to use it to build himself a national foothold via his province of Junín (in the central highlands of Peru). Even though he gave his party a "Marxist" and "Leninist" public profile, he was prepared to enter into electoral alliances, for example, with the libertarian party, but all to no avail, in 2016 his candidacy was barely visible. However, this year, it was clear that he could not stand himself because of serious allegation of corruption.

Initially, negotiations for a joint candidacy were held with the JPP, but this met with great reservations within the latter because of Cerrón's "criminal" reputation. Therefore, it was finally decided to run separately and to nominate Pedro Castillo, who is not a professional politician but a primary school teacher, for Perú Libre. He had gained national fame in 2017 as the uncompromising grassroots leader of the teachers' strike. Back then, he already combined the teachers' demands with a denunciation of the misery of the students, with which the schools are completely overwhelmed. His credibility as an incorruptible advocate for the socially vulnerable immediately catapulted Castillo to the top of the presidential election polls in the situation of the current crisis.

Even though the right-wing unleashed a plethora of anti-communist polemics against Castillo until the run-off election, this obviously did not decisively weaken his popularity, especially in the socially disadvantaged regions of Peru, and in the poor districts of Lima. Yet neither his party nor Castillo himself are an established left-wing force. His election promises revolved around a "new constitution" that would roll back the neoliberal reforms of the Fujimori era, and the nationalisation of the mining sector, nothing more than what left-wing nationalists like Humala had promised before. Aside from that, Castillo represents an extremely conservative programme: against a liberalisation of the strict abortion law, against gay marriage, against a restriction of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, etc. In one scandalous interview, he downplayed the terrible extent of femicide in Peru, explaining it away as a consequence of boredom and high unemployment.

In addition, although Perú Libre is now the strongest party in Congress (with 37 of 130 deputies), it is heavily dependent on coalition partners, even beyond the JPP. The latter also provides many more "experts" for government work than the newcomer party PL which is why Castillo's key economic advisers all come from this part of the political establishment. Of course, they have already dictated to Castillo statements on issues of nationalisation of the mining industry that have reassured global markets. One only has to look to neighbouring Chile to see how the process of forming a constituent assembly can also be steered into channels controlled by capital.

The Right

The decisive political and economic turn in Peru, which broke with the various experiments of left nationalism, took place in the 1990s under Keiko Fujimori's father Alberto. As in the rest of Latin America, the "lost decade" of the 1980s saw a complete end to the model of so-called import-substitution industrialisation. In Peru, specifically, this meant the complete abandonment of state industrialisation and the sale of the country's natural resources to international corporations.

Market liberalisation and neo-extractivism went hand in hand with the dismantling of trade union rights, social security systems and an extremely brutal military fight against all resistance, not only the Maoist guerrillas of the "Shining Path". The Fujimori regime also developed an extreme racism against indigenous people, which even led to forced sterilisation programmes. Fujimori is in fact proof of how closely racism and liberalism are still linked.

Even if he later fell out of favour with parts of the establishment (he was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2009 for his obvious humanitarian crimes), none of the subsequent governments fundamentally changed the neoliberal thrust of his reforms. Even Castillo's promise to establish a constitution that would end the "Fujimori system" would be impossible without a fundamental upheaval of property relations including the dismantling of the existing (armed) state apparatus.

All the same, even Castillo's very vague announcements obviously make the rulers in Peru very nervous. This was already visible in the blatant anti-communist rhetoric during the election campaign, with which the danger of a new Venezuela was conjured up. After Castillo's narrow election victory on 6 June, an unprecedented campaign against the threat of the "communist" taking office began.

The "fraud" campaign

Donald Trump has already shown how the far right handles elections these days. An election result that does not fit is simply declared fraudulent and all opposing evidence is dismissed as fake. The truth is not decisive here, what matters is the scale of the mobilisation in support of the falsification accusation, which must have a sufficiently subversive effect. Racism and class hatred play an essential role in this. Indeed, at the centre of the electoral fraud is the accusation that certain "inferior" people should not be able to vote at all. In addition, of course, there are large "globalist" conspiracies that are supposed to have manipulated the voting machines or the election observation, with more or less open antisemitic undertones.

In Peru, too, the evidence of electoral fraud is virtually non-existent. All election observers have given the process an exemplary report card. Even the observers from the Organisation of American States or the USA, who are usually rather "critical" of left-wing successes, have not identified any fraud. Despite all this, Fujimori has been able to assemble a veritable armada of the country's best lawyers, who have overwhelmed the electoral court with complaints relating to some 200,000 votes. Even though the court has so far found nothing to indicate major irregularities, enough sand has been thrown into the gears to start mass right-wing protests in parallel. An ever-growing right-wing mob threatens ever more aggressive riots; at the rallies, the Conquistador crosses are shown together with the Hitler salute to emphasise that Peru is "European" and should not be allowed to fall into the hands of "communist Indians".

In addition, there are appeals from thousands of ex-military personnel calling on their active comrades to "save Peru from communism". Even a Nobel laureate, the poet Vargas Llosa, has declared himself in favour of military intervention to "save the fatherland". If the announcement of the final election results is further delayed and the Congress is paralysed, military intervention may not be far off.

The response of the working class

The right-wing, anti-democratic mobilisation must be put in its place with all necessary force. Despite all the criticism of Castillo and the left reformist and populist parties he represents, democratic rights must be defended, including the recognition of election results. This also means organising mass mobilisations and self-defence committees of workers, indigenous people, the rural poor and all other oppressed sectors of society against the violent protests of the right. Any attempt to suppress democratic rights, whether through a military coup or through a disqualification of the electoral victory by the Election Commission, should be met with a general strike organised by the grassroots organs of the counter-protest and the trade unions.

This mobilisation of workers, indigenous people and poor peasants must also be used to transform the Constituent Assembly promised by Castillo into a body whose election and convention is controlled and supervised by these same bodies.

In such a constituent assembly, revolutionaries would have to lead an open struggle for a socialist transformation, for the expropriation of Peruvian and foreign big business under workers' control, for the cancellation of foreign debt and the expropriation of big land ownership. They would have to stand for an immediate plan to fight poverty and pandemic.

To secure this, the struggle itself will have to go beyond the scope of such an assembly. For a socialist revolution, the existing bourgeois state and repressive apparatus must be smashed and the rank and file soldiers must be drawn to the side of the masses by refusing to follow the putschist plans of the right and forming soldiers' committees and councils that act independently of the military command. Most importantly, the structures of struggle against a possible coup and for decisive reforms must be developed into councils and armed bodies to defend this revolution. Given the state of the left in Peru, this objective will ultimately only be achieved if an actual revolutionary workers' party emerges in the struggle for proletarian independence in order to lead it to victory!

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