

Peru: new actors, same stage

The power struggle between Peru's ex-president and parliament seems decided. Nation-wide social outrage is unleashed

Peru's ousted head of state, Pedro Castillo, must remain in pre-trial detention for 18 months given his flight risk, a court ruled on December 15, 2022. He may face a maximum sentence of up to 20 years for his coup attempt. Protests have been escalating for days, leading to the death of already 15 protesters. The new government has responded with a 30-day state of emergency.

Peru has been marred in a permanent state of political instability. In the last six years alone, Peru has seen six presidents take office and Castillo's 16-month presidency saw no less than five cabinets and the swearing-in of 84 ministers. The vast majority of Peru's former presidents, 21 out of 25 governors in the period between 2018-2022, and more than 1000 mayors are under investigation or face corruption charges. Add to that an ongoing confrontation between the left-leaning president and a congress dominated by right-wing parties. The result? Minimal policy achievements to the benefit of Peru's citizens and festering frustration ready to burst.

Failures and defeats

When the previously little known, village school teacher and trade unionist unexpectedly won the presidential elections in 2021 for the political party *Perú Libre* (PL), it was a sensation for the common person. Nevertheless, Castillo's time in office was characterised by political inexperience and improvisation. He lacked experienced advisors as well as the management skills to direct the policy direction of his administration. His choice of ministers was all too often based on political compromise with the party leadership or selected from his small circle of contacts. This led to mediocre results and a government unable to advance on even one of Castillo's 2021 election campaign promises: a new constitution, an all-out fight against corruption, a second agrarian reform and a tax reform, amongst other policy objectives. Castillo already survived two

impeachment trials in December 2021 and March 2022. Another parliamentary vote to impeach Castillo on the basis of an elusive constitutional article on 'permanent moral incapacity' (read: corruption allegations) was scheduled for 7 December.

That same day, events came to a head: President Castillo's unsuccessful attempt to dissolve parliament was followed by an overwhelming vote by Congress to impeach the president. On his way to the Mexican embassy to seek asylum, Castillo was arrested. The day ended with the swift swearing-in of Vice President Dina Boluarte as the first woman president.

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What prompted Castillo to announce the dissolution of Congress, an emergency government and the reorganisation of the judicial system on that particular day? There are various speculations. Did his advisors claim that he would receive overwhelming public support due to the strong public rejection of Congress? Was he falsely promised that he would be supported by the national police and the army? Did he think he would lose this third vote on his impeachment? Did he feel pressured by the further allegations of corruption that were made to the public prosecutor's office on the very morning of the coup attempt? Or was he threatened and forced to take this step? None of these questions has been definitively answered yet. This discussion, however, quickly shifted to the more urgent issue of restoring peace and political stability in a country rocked by ever-increasing social unrest.

Boluarte was a member of the progressive left-wing party *Tierra y Libertad* before aligning with the extreme left and socially conservative PL in 2018. Little known, but armed with public administration experience, she ran with Castillo for the presidential elections in 2021. Soon after the election victory, she quickly distanced herself from PL and was expelled from the party.

In the five days since taking office, Boluarte adopted a conciliatory tone and pushed for a political truce to form a government of national unity. She promised to select ministers based on their abilities rather than their connections and refused to allow any one person to occupy a

congressional position concurrently with a ministerial position. Unlike her predecessor, who chose to no longer speak with the traditional, predominantly conservative media, she reopened direct communication.

After initially declaring her intention to complete the presidential term ending July 2026, the growing protests and social unrest calling for early elections and the establishment of a constituent assembly lead Boularte to announce general elections (for president and Congress) for April 2024. Unable to placate the heated situation with this announcement, she again revised this date, bringing elections forward to December 2023. Congress will begin deliberations on amending the constitution to allow for early elections.

From one crisis to the next

Prompted by the death of 15 protesters, hundreds of injured police and protesters, the rapid nation-wide spread of protests and violence, the closure of several airports, vandalism, school closures and massive economic losses, a nation-wide state of emergency was declared for 30 days. Not surprisingly, this decision was taken the day before a massive demonstration organised by key social organisations was scheduled for 15 December, 2022.

The protests are taking place in a country that has been particularly affected by the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The people of Peru are suffering. The war in Ukraine is also leading to rising inflation, high energy prices and a negative impact on food security. People have lost patience with their bickering politicians, who are perceived as entirely self-interested, corrupt and ineffective. This is reflected in the results of a November 2022 poll by the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP), in which public support for Castillo was 31 per cent, for Congress a mere 10 per cent and for new elections a whopping 87 per cent.

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Even if President Boularte survives the current unrest, she has no power base in Congress. *Perú Libre* considers her a traitor to the party. The current Congress – largely politically right-wing to far-right and anti-left – remains in a position to torpedo any political reform proposal that would go against their interests. This is especially true with regard to a new constitution. Even a well-run, technocratic government is no guarantee that ministers will not be

hampered or obstructed in their work by Congress.

Should the current crisis escalate, President Boluarte may have no choice but to resign. In that case, the President of Congress, José Williams, would temporarily take over the presidency under Article 115 of the Constitution and call general elections. But Williams is also a controversial figure. Given his problematic military past and his continued influence on the armed forces, he may be even more adamantly rejected by the population.

Although new elections currently appear to be a means to restore social peace, they are not the solution to the deep-rooted systemic and structural problems plaguing the country: widespread corruption, the lack of a programmatic party system, and the necessary reforms in the legislative, electoral and judicial systems. New actors need to get serious about building this new stage.



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