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Peru's democracy is under threat

Three months after the arrest of ex-President Castillo, violence persists in Peru. What is needed now is mediation from outside

Three months after the 'rebellion at the top of the state' and the ousting of President Pedro Castillo by the parliament on the grounds of 'permanent moral incapacity', violence is now dominating Peru's political disputes. The parliament-elected president and former vice-president under Castillo, Dina Boluarte, is now responsible for at least 60 dead and almost 2,000 injured – mostly on the social protest side. Due to the massive use of force by the police and military against the protests that have flared up again and again throughout the country, the public prosecutor's office has brought charges against Boluarte, along with the head of the Council of Ministers, the interior minister, the defence minister and other members of her cabinet, who have since resigned. In Peru, democracy is currently under as much threat as it was in the 1990s, when dictator Alberto Fujimori also came to power in a 'coup d'état from above' and over 10,000 people were killed in the almost civil war-like purges in the conflict between his government and the radical Maoist movement *Sendero Luminoso*.

However, the extent to which President Boluarte and the members of the government will be sentenced can hardly be predicted, since the legal proceedings for 'official misconduct' in Peru usually begin only after the end of the respective term of office and associated loss of immunity. But, once possible, it occurs with very clear results: five of the last six presidents have been condemned in this way. Since his conviction in 2009, ex-president Alberto Fujimori has been held in the same prison as ex-president Pedro Castillo, who is currently awaiting sentencing. He is initially in pre-trial custody for 36 months on charges of rebelling against state authority.

Why have the protests in the provinces gotten so massive and violent since Pedro Castillo was removed from office? They are above all the reaction of those who were not involved in Peru's positive economic development – in other words, the representatives of the 'other Peru', first and foremost the poorer part of the population, for whom the ex-

president was a beacon of hope. The protests are directed at the opposition to Castillo – in parliament, among the business and political elites and in the media – which was initially against his very close electoral victory and later against his attempts at political reform, which in any case were unsuccessful. Above all, however, it is a reaction to the form of his 'constitutional' ouster for his attempted coup 'à la Fujimori' – which Castillo carried out without realising that he could not count on the support of either the military or a majority of the population.

A lack of trust in democracy

The structural division of Peruvian society into the largely white middle and upper classes in the large cities and the largely indigenous lower classes in the provinces, especially in the south, has intensified considerably in the last three months. Two irreconcilable narratives seem to have taken hold: for 'modern' Peru, the protesters are mostly vandals and are led by ex-terrorists and criminals, possibly with support from abroad. This categorisation, which is also being propagated by the government, is particularly dangerous in Peru due to the previous years of bloody conflicts with terrorism. It blocks any possibility of dialogue, which has been repeatedly called for by various social protest groups as well as by indigenous leaders. However, this urgently needed dialogue is also being made more difficult by the diversity of protest measures occurring in the absence of any recognisable organisation or national leadership structure.

The national protest is clearly reflected in the polls, with 74 per cent demanding the resignation of the president and 82 per cent calling for new elections.

The initially largely peaceful protests against President Boluarte and parliament quickly became uncontrollable due to the excessive use of force by the police and military against the demonstrators, especially in the provinces. Road blockades, airport occupations and arson attacks on police stations and judicial institutions have brought parts of the country to the brink of ungovernability, with significant effects on trade and tourism. The continual extension of the state of emergency and the restrictions on freedom of assembly associated with it were in turn understood by the protest groups as an increase in state repression. The national protest is clearly reflected in the polls, with 74 per cent demanding the resignation of the president and 82 per cent calling for new elections. However, the latter is unlikely to contribute to calming the political conflicts, as this would require

various reforms to the 1993 constitution, which has long been a source of contention in Peru and whose reform is being demanded by almost 70 per cent of the population.

This constitution had abolished the Senate as the second chamber of parliament, halved the number of MPs, and barred their re-election at the end of a term, in order to strengthen the government's role. Moreover, it has also created the conditions for the parliament and government to destroy each other 'constitutionally'. This option has been used so frequently over the past 30 years that for the vast majority of people in Peru, the political system is no longer sustainable. They see the country's central political institutions as lacking democratic legitimacy, especially when the repression of the demonstrators is described by the government as 'legitimate violence' and the work of the police by the president as 'impeccable'. So it's hardly surprising that in surveys on satisfaction with democracy, Peru ranks comes second to last, behind Haiti, with 21 per cent approval.

A strong regional reaction

President Boluarte, however, has tried several times in recent weeks to persuade parliament to bring the elections forward to the end of this year or at least to May 2024. But this has not been successful, because the majority of MPs do not want to lose their income or their immunity in the face of the multiple corruption proceedings. Due to the extreme polarisation in the country, they would also have little hope for any political future. As it stands now, the Peruvians will probably need to wait until 2026 before they can vote again.

A decision to bring forward the elections or for the president to resign is currently not to be expected and therefore there is no doubt that the future of democracy in Peru is seriously at risk. In the meantime, attention to the deterioration of democracy in Peru has also increased abroad. The Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Human Rights Council have urged the government to launch a swift and independent investigation into the excesses of violence at the demonstrations. They have also pointed out that the rights of the protesters were frequently violated not only by the police forces but also by judicial authorities.

In the region itself, there has also been fierce criticism of the authoritarian style of Dina Boluarte and her government. Mexico, which had offered Pedro Castillo political asylum and has since taken in his family, is willingly accepting a diplomatic conflict in return for

supporting the ex-president. The Peruvian ambassador was recalled from Mexico, and the Mexican representative in Peru was declared persona non grata. Colombian President Gustavo Petro had also sharply criticised the form of the transfer of power in Lima and was therefore honoured with the same 'title'. This amounts to a political reaction that in no way fits into the regionally praised role of Peruvian diplomacy.

Due to the dramatic polarisation, there seem to be hardly any forces left within the country's political system that could bring about a peaceful solution to the situation.

The particular sensitivity to regional criticism on the part of a government that is under constant domestic political pressure may also be related to the fact that, due to the change of government, Mexico did not routinely pass on the 'presidency pro tempore' of the Pacific Alliance trade bloc (Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile) to Peru. But Argentina, Bolivia, and Honduras have also been very critical of the new government's treatment of former President Pedro Castillo. Two weeks ago, the US even called on the government to find a way out of the dangerous situation through serious dialogue with the demonstrators.

Due to the dramatic polarisation, there seem to be hardly any forces left within the country's political system that could bring about a peaceful solution to the situation. What is needed now is mediation from outside. The UN and EU have already indicated that they are available for this. The regional organisation that is actually responsible for this, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), would not be recognised by Peru as a mediator anyway, due to the strong criticism from some of the member states.



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