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Peru

Who's afraid of Pedro Castillo?

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What happened in the Peruvian elections is perhaps the closest thing to the "Storm in the Andes" (Tempestad en los Andes, 1927) predicted by Luis E. Valcárcel (1891-1987) in his now classic book with a preface by José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930). Attracted by the idea of "myth", Mariátegui ends his preface by writing: "And it does not matter that for some it is the facts that create the prophecy and for others it is the prophecy that creates the facts." What happened on 6 June was certainly not an indigenous uprising like the one imagined by Luis E. Valcárcel, nor an uprising like the one imagined by José Carlos Mariátegui, as the birthing mother of socialism. But it was an electoral uprising in deep Andean Peru, whose effects covered the whole country.

Pedro Castillo Terrones is far from being a messiah, but he appeared "out of nowhere" in the electoral contest, as if he were one. With the results of Sunday 6 June, he is about to become the most unlikely president. Not because he is an outsider - the country has been full of them since the "Chinese" [Japanese] Alberto Fujimori took power in 1990, after defeating Mario Vargas Llosa - but because of his class background: he is a peasant from Cajamarca, tied to the land, who - without ever abandoning this link with the mountains [the town of Cajamarca is at a height of 2,750 metres] - has overcome various difficulties. He became a rural teacher. In presidential debates, he used to end his speeches with the phrase "the word of a teacher".

Pedro Castillo came from the teaching profession and entered the national scene in 2017, following a combative teachers' strike against the union leadership. A recent documentary, precisely entitled "[The Teacher](#)", gives several insights into his person, his family and his environment. Unlike Luis E. Valcárcel - whose indigenism was inserted into the feud of the elites: Andean Cuzco and "white" Lima - Pedro Castillo comes from a much more marginal north in terms of Peruvian geopolitics. His identity is more "provincial" and peasant than strictly indigenous. From there, he won over the electorate of the southern Andes and also attracted, albeit to a lesser extent, the popular vote in Lima.

That is why, when Keiko Fujimori accepted the challenge to go and debate in the town of Chota [in the north] and said with disgust: "I had to come all the way here", this phrase remained as one of the setbacks of her campaign. Pedro Castillo managed to take politics out of Lima and into the most remote and isolated corners of the country, which he visited one by one during his campaign with a giant pencil in his hand.

Castillo's surge in the first round - with almost 19% of the vote - caused hysteria in the wealthy sectors of the capital. In keeping with the current fashion for zombie anti-communism, it was expressed in a widespread "No to communism", even manifesting itself in giant posters in the streets. There was no shortage of racism either. Peru seems to be less shy about expressing it in public than its neighbours, Ecuador or Bolivia.

For example, the "controversial" journalist Beto Ortiz expelled the Perú Libre deputy [the party that presented Pedro Castillo], Zaira Arias, from his TV show, showing that "political correctness" does not reach certain sectors of Lima's elites. He then called her a "fruit and vegetable seller" and then disguised himself as an Indian - in his usual antics - to sarcastically welcome Pedro Castillo's "new Per".

Pedro Castillo's candidacy has also been a constant victim of "terruqueo" (accusations of links to terrorism) due to his

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union alliances during the teachers' strike and - given his lack of previous experience in the electoral arena - his own missteps during interviews.

As Alberto Vergara wrote in the [New York Times](#) on 8 June: "Those who used the politics of fear most treacherously were those in the pro-Fujimori camp, the upper classes and the mainstream media. Businessmen <https://ojo-publico.com/2672/propaganda-en-paneles-puede-ser-investigada-por-ley-de-financiamiento> class='spip_out' rel='external'>threatened to fire their employees paid for by the businessmen warning of 'an imminent communist invasion'." Even Mario Vargas Llosa abandoned his traditional anti-Fujimorismo stance - which is why he had even called for a vote for Ollanta Humala in 2011 - and decided to give a candidate with the Fujimori surname a chance.

Pedro Castillo is far from coming from a communist background. He spent several years in local politics under the banner of Perú Posible, the party of former president Alejandro Toledo (president from July 2001 to July 2006). Although he ran for Perú Libre, he is not an 'organic' member of the party, which was originally born as Perú Libertario. Perú Libre defines itself as "Marxist-Leninist-Marist", but many of its candidates [deny being "communists"](#).

The leader of the party, Vladimir Cerrón, has defined the movement behind Pedro Castillo as a "provincial left", as opposed to the "caviar" left in Lima. Pedro Castillo is an "evangelical compatible" Catholic: his wife and daughter are active in the Evangelical Church of the Nazarene and he himself joins their prayers. During the campaign, he repeatedly spoke out against abortion or same-sex marriage. This is despite the fact that today many of his technicians and advisors come from the urban left, led by Verónica Mendoza [a Franco-Peruvian who ran in the first round on the left-wing list Juntos por el Perú; she called for a vote for Pedro Castillo against Keiko Fujimori], with progressive social visions. It remains to be seen how these tendencies will coexist in Pedro Castillo's future government, which is not expected to be easy.

Castillo also defines himself as a "rondero" [a member of the peasants' rounds], referring to the peasant groups created in the north in the 1970s to fight against cattle theft. These groups were then developed in the country during the 1980s to deal with the Shining Path guerrillas. They often act as a reference authority in the countryside.

The uncertainty of a future Castillo government has nothing to do, precisely, with the constitution of a "communist experiment" of any kind. A "Venezuelanization" as announced by his detractors also seems highly unlikely. The armed forces do not seem easily controllable; the parliamentary weight of "Castillism" is limited; the economic elites are more resistant than in a purely oil country like Venezuela; the structuring of the social movement does not announce a "revolutionary nationalism" of the Chavist or Cuban type.

Professor Castillo's statements show a certain plebeian disregard for institutions, a lack of clarity about the government's direction, and visions of crime control that favour the extension of 'ronda justice' to the rest of Peru (a type of justice that often imposes various types of punishment on those who commit crimes). But they also include rhetoric referring to an iron fist, as seen in the electoral debates.

The presence in government of the "other left" - urban and cosmopolitan - can function as a virtuous balance between the progressive and the popular. Nevertheless, it will also be a source of internal tensions. Some compare Castillo to Evo Morales. There is undoubtedly a shared symbology and histories. But there are also differences. One is purely anecdotal: rather than exaggerating his achievements in terms of meritocracy, Evo Morales claims not to have completed high school (although some of his teachers claim otherwise). The other is more important for the

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government's purposes: the former Bolivian president arrived at the Palacio Quemado in 2006, after eight years at the head of the parliamentary bloc of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) and following the experience of a presidential campaign in 2002, as well as having behind him a confederation of social movements with strong territorial weight, articulated to MAS. Pedro Castillo has, for the moment, a party that is not his own and a social-electoral support that is still diffuse.

Castillo's "white fear" is linked, more than to a real danger of communism, to the prospect of a loss of power in a country where the elites have avoided the region's left turn and co-opted those who won with reformist programmes, such as Ollanta Humala (president from 2011 to 2016). To put it in a more "old-fashioned" way: the "white fear" is the prospect of a weakening of "amonalismo", as the system of power built by hacienda owners before the agrarian reform was called in Peru, and which has continued in other forms in the country. No one knows whether the elites will also be able to co-opt Pedro Castillo. However, in this case the class gap is deeper than in the past and the scenario is generally less predictable. The 'Castillo surprise' is too recent and in many ways he is an unknown, even to those who will be his collaborators.

It is possible that the "electoral storm" will be the harbinger of more to come if the elites want to continue governing as they have become accustomed to doing.

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