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Peru

Golpe in Peru: Castillo under arrest, people demand a constituent assembly

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It finally occurred. On December 7th 2022 Peru's ruling parliamentary dictatorship managed to bring to fruition their top priority, to oust democratically elected president Pedro Castillo Terrones. Castillo, a rural primary teacher, elected to Peru's highest office in July 2021, from day one faced the Peruvian oligarchy's relentless hostility. Peru's elite is strongly entrenched in Congress and controls all key state institutions (the judiciary, army, police), the highly influential business organizations (notably the Confederación de Empresarios Privados – CONFIEP), and crucially, the totality of the mainstream media.

Regardless of Castillo presidency's evident shortcomings and mistakes, his ouster represents a grave setback for democracy in Peru and Latin America as a whole. His election last year took place on the back of an almighty crisis of credibility and legitimacy of a political system rigged with corruption and venality in which presidents were forced to resign on corruption charges (some ended in prison), with one committing suicide before being arrested on corruption charges. In the last six years Peru has had six presidents.

The rot was so advanced that no mainstream political party or politician could muster sufficient electoral support to succeed in winning the presidency in 2021 (the main right-wing party, *Fuerza Popular's* candidate got less than 14% of the vote in the first round). It goes a long way to explain why an unknown rural primary school teacher from the remote Andean indigenous area of Cajamarca, Pedro Castillo, would become the 63rd president of Peru. In Cajamarca, Castillo obtained up to 72% of the popular vote.

Castillo's election offered a historic chance to bury Peruvian neoliberalism. I myself penned [an article](#) with that prognosis, which I premised on Castillo's commitment to democratize Peruvian politics via a Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting a new constitution as the base from which to re-found the nation on an anti-neoliberal basis. A proposal that, in the light of recent experience in Latin America, is perfectly implementable but whose precondition, as other experiences in the region have shown, is the vigorous mobilization of the mass of the people, the working class, the peasantry, the urban poor, and all other subordinate strata from society. This did not happen in Peru under Castillo's presidency.

Ironically, the mass mobilizations that broke out in the Andean regions and in many other areas and cities in Peru when they learned of Castillo's impeachment solidly confirms that this was the only possible route to implement his programme of change. The mass mobilizations throughout the nation (including Lima) are demanding a Constituent Assembly, the closure of the existing Congress, the liberation, and reinstatement of Castillo to the presidency, and the holding of immediate general elections.

This would explain the paradox that right-wing hostility to president Castillo, unlike other left governments in Latin America, was not waged because Castillo was undertaking any radical government action. In fact, opposition to his government was so blindingly intense that almost every initiative, no matter how trivial or uncontroversial, was met with ferocious rejection by Peru's right-wing dominated Congress. The Congress' key right-wing party, was *Fuerza Popular* led by Keiko Fujimori, daughter of Peru's former dictator, Alberto Fujimori. In Peru's Congress of 130 seats, Castillo counted on 15, originally solid, votes from *Peru Libre*, and 5, not very solid, votes from *Juntos por el Peru*. In the absence of government mobilization of the masses, the oligarchy knew Castillo represented no threat, thus their intense hostility was to treat his government as an abhorrent abnormality sending a message to the nation that it should never have happened and that would never recur.

One example of parliament's obtuse obstructionism was the impeachment of his minister of foreign relations, Hector

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Béjar, a well reputed left-wing academic and intellectual on 17th August 2021, who, barely 15 days after his appointment and less than a month after Castillo's inauguration (28th July 2021), was forced to resign. Béjar's "offence", a statement made at a public conference in February 2020 during the election – before his ministerial appointment – in which he asserted a historical fact: terrorism was begun by Peru's Navy in 1974 well before the appearance of the Shining Path [1980]. Béjar was the first minister out of many to be arbitrarily impeached by Congress.

Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), an extreme guerrilla group, was active in substantial parts of the countryside during the 1980s-1990s and whose confrontation with state military forces led to a generalised situation of conflict. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that, after the collapse of the Fujimori dictatorship, investigated the atrocities perpetrated during the state war against the Shining Path, [reported](#) that 69,280 people died or disappeared between 1980 and 2000.

Congress' harassment aimed at preventing Castillo's government from even functioning can be verified with numbers: in the 495 days he lasted in office, Castillo was forced to appoint a total of 78 ministers. Invariably, appointed ministers as in the case of Béjar, would be subjected to ferocious attack by the media and the Establishment (in Béjar's case, by the Navy itself) and by the right-wing parliamentary majority that was forcing ministers' resignation with the eagerness of zealous witch hunters.

Béjar was ostensibly impeached for his accurate commentary about the Navy's activities in the 1970s but more likely for having made the decision for Peru to abandon the Lima Group, adopting a non-interventionist foreign policy towards Venezuela and for condemning unilateral sanctions against nations. Béjar made the announcement of the new policy on 3rd August 2021 and the "revelations" about his Navy commentary were made on August 15th. The demonization campaign was in full swing immediately after that which included: soldiers holding public rallies demanding his resignation, a parliamentary motion from a coalition of parliamentary forces essentially for "not being fit for the post", and for adhering to a "communist ideology."

Something similar but not identical happened with Béjar's replacement, Oscar Maurtua, a career diplomat, who had served as minister of foreign relations in several previous right-wing governments from 2005. When in October 2021, Guido Bellido, a radical member of *Peru Libre*, who upon being appointed Minister of Government, threatened the nationalisation of Camisea gas, an operation run by multinational capital, for refusing to renegotiate its profits in favour of the Peruvian state, Maurtua resigned two weeks later. Guido Bellido himself, was forced to resign ostensibly for an "apologia of terrorism" but in reality for having had the audacity to threaten to nationalise an asset that ought to belong to Peru.

On 6th October 2021, Guido Bellido, a national leader of *Peru Libre*, who had been Castillo's Minister of Government since 29 July, offered his resignation at the president's request triggered by his nationalization threat. Vladimir Cerrón, *Peru Libre*'s key national leader followed suit by publicly breaking with Castillo on 16th October, asking him to leave the party and thus leaving Castillo without the party's parliamentary support. Ever since, *Peru Libre* has suffered several divisions.

Worse, Castillo was pushed into a corner by being forced to select ministers to the liking of the right-wing parliamentary majority to avoid them not being approved. All took place within a context dominated by intoxicating media demonization, accusations, fake news and generalised hostility to his government but with a Damocles sword – a motion to declare his presidency "vacant" and thus be impeached – hanging over his head.

The first attempt was in November 2021 (a few weeks after Bellido's forced resignation). It did not gather sufficient parliamentary support (46 against 76, 4 abstentions). The second was in March 2022 with the charge of "permanent moral incapacity", which got 55 votes (54 against and 19 abstentions) but failed because procedurally 87 votes were

required. And finally, on 1st December 2022, Congress voted in favour of initiating a process to declare “vacancy” against Castillo for “permanent moral incapacity.” This time, the right wing had managed to gather 73 votes (32 against and 6 abstentions). The motion of well over 100 pages, included at least six “parliamentary investigations” for allegedly “leading a criminal organization”, for traffic of influences, for obstruction of justice, for treason (in an interview Castillo broached the possibility of offering Bolivia access to the sea through Peruvian territory), and even, for “plagiarizing” his MA thesis.

By then Castillo was incredibly isolated surrounded by the rarefied, putrid and feverish Lima political establishment that were as a pack of hungry wolves that had scented blood: Castillo would have to face a final hearing set by Peru’s congressional majority on 7th December. On the same day, in an event surrounded by confusion – maliciously depicted by the world mainstream media as a coup d’état – the president went on national TV to announce his decision to dissolve Congress temporarily, establish an exceptional emergency government and, the holding of elections to elect a new Congress with Constituent Assembly powers within nine months. US ambassador in Lima, Lisa D. Kenna, immediately reacted on that very day with a note stressing the US “*rejects any unconstitutional act by president Castillo to prevent Congress to fulfil its mandate.*” The Congress’s “mandate” was to impeach president Castillo.

We know the rest of the story: Congress on the same day carried the “vacancy” motion by 101 votes, Castillo was arrested, and Dina Boluarte has been sworn in as interim president. Declaring the dissolution of the Congress may not have been the most skilful tactical move Castillo made but he put the limelight on the key institution that obstinately obstructed the possibility of socio-economic progress that Castillo’s presidency represented.

Castillo had no support whatsoever among the economic or political elite, the judiciary, the state bureaucracy, the police or the armed forces, or the mainstream media. He was politically right in calling for the dissolution of the obstruction of Congress to allow for the mass of the people through the ballot box to be given the chance to democratically remove it. An *Instituto de Estudios Peruanos* (IEP in its Spanish acronym) survey in November showed the rate of disapproval of Congress to be 86%, up 5 points from October, and staying on 75-78% throughout the second half 2021.

What was not expected with Castillo’s impeachment was the vigorous outburst of social mobilization throughout Peru. Its epicentre was in the Peruvian ‘sierra’, the indigenous hinterlands where Castillo got most of his electoral support, but also in key cities, including Lima. The demands raised by the mass movement are for the reinstatement of Castillo, dissolution of Congress, the resignation of Boluarte, the holding of immediate parliamentary elections and, a new constitution. Demonstrators, expressing their fury in Lima, carried placards declaring “*Congress is a den of rats*”.

In light of the huge mass mobilizations one inevitably wonders why was this not unleashed before, say, one and a half year ago? Castillo, heavily isolated and under almighty pressure, hoping to buy some breathing space, sought to ingratiate himself with the national and international right by, for example, appointing a neoliberal economist, Julio Valverde, in charge of the Central Bank, tried to get closer to the deadly Organization of American States, met Bolsonaro in Brazil and, distanced himself from Venezuela. To no avail, the elite demanded ever more concessions but would never be satisfied no matter how many Castillo made.

The repression unleashed against the popular mobilizations has been swift and brutal but ineffective. Reports talk of at least eighteen people killed by bullets from the police and more than a hundred injured, yet mobilizations and marches have grown and spread further. Though the “interim government” has already banned demonstrations, they have continued. Three days ago they occupied the Andahuaylas airport; an indefinite strike has been declared in Cusco; in Apurimac, school lessons have been suspended; plus a multiple blockading of motorways in many points in the country. It is evident the political atmosphere in Peru was already pretty charged and these social energies

were dormant but waiting to be awoken.

Though it is premature to draw too many conclusions about what this popular resistance might bring about, it is clear that the oligarchy miscalculated what it expected the outcome of Castillo's ouster would be: the crushing defeat of this attempt, however timid, of the lower classes, especially cholos (pejorative name for indigenous people in Peru), to change the status quo. Peru's oligarchy found it intolerable that a cholo, Castillo, was the country's president and even less that he dared to threaten to enlist the mass of the people to actively participate in a Constituent Assembly entrusted with drafting a new constitution.

The appointed interim president, Dina Boluarte, feeling the pressure of the mass mobilization announced a proposal to hold 'anticipated elections' in 2024 instead of 2026, the date of the end of Castillo's official mandate. However, it has been reported that Castillo sent a message to the people encouraging them to fight for a Constituent Assembly and not fall into the "dirty trap of new elections." Through one of his lawyers, Dr Ronald Atencio, Castillo communicated that his detention was illegal and arbitrary with his constitutional rights being violated, that he is the subject of political persecution, which threatens to turn him into a political prisoner, that he has no intention of seeking asylum, and that he is fully aware of the mobilizations throughout the country and the demands for his freedom.

We'll see how things develop from here. Castillo's ouster is a negative development; it is a setback for the left in Peru and for democracy in Latin America. Latin America's left presidents have understood this and condemned the parliamentary coup against democratically elected president Pedro Castillo. Among the presidents condemning the coup are, Cuba's Miguel Diaz-Canel, Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro, Honduras' Xiomara Castro, Argentina's Fernandez, Colombia's Petro, Mexico's Lopez Obrador, and Bolivia's Arce.

More dramatically, the presidents of Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Bolivia issued a joint communiqué (12th December) demanding Castillo's reinstatement that in its relevant part reads, "*It is not news to the world that President Castillo Terrones, from the day of his election, was the victim of anti-democratic harassment [...] Our governments call on all actors involved in the above process to prioritise the will of the people as expressed at the ballot box. This is the way to interpret the scope and meaning of the notion of democracy as enshrined in the Inter-American Human Rights System. We urge those who make up the institutions to refrain from reversing the popular will expressed through free suffrage.*" (my translation)

At the XIII ALBA-TCP summit held in Havana on December 15th, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent and the Grenadines; Saint Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, Grenada and Cuba condemned the detention of president Pedro Castillo which they characterised as a coup d'etat.

It is very doubtful that Peru's oligarchy will be able to bring political stability to the country. Since 2016 the country has had 6 presidents, none of whom has completed their mandate, and the impeachment of Castillo has let the genie (militant mass mobilizations) out of the bottle and it looks pretty unlikely they will be able to put it back. The illegitimate government of Boluarte has on 14th December declared a state of emergency throughout the national territory and, ominously, placed the armed forces in charge of securing law and order. The armed forces, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that investigated the dirty war between the Peruvian state and the Shining Path guerrillas (1980-1992), were responsible for about 50 per cent of the 70,000 deaths the war cost. It is the typical but worst possible action that Peru's oligarchy can undertake.

The demands of the mass movement must be met: immediate and unconditional freedom of president Castillo, the immediate holding of elections for a Constituent Assembly for a new anti- neoliberal constitution, and for the immediate cessation of the brutal repression by sending the armed forces back to their barracks.

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Source: [Public Reading Rooms](#).

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