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Peru

Rising Up Against Corruption

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THE DRAMATIC RECENT events in Peru, barely covered by mainstream U.S. media, have seen a popular uprising of massive self-organized protests. In November the student-led demonstrations in Lima and other large cities were met by riot police equipped with water cannons, tanks, and helicopters.

Corruption has tainted the political elite for years. Elected president in 2016, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, was forced to resign two years later over his failure to disclose ties to the corrupt Brazilian construction company, Odebrecht. Martín Vizcarra replaced him and attempted to carry out reforms. He tried to get rid of the prosecutorial immunity granted to lawmakers, alter how judges are chosen and even dissolved Congress in 2019. Popular for his reform plans, he had no party backing him in Congress, which for its part blocked his moves and finally, on November 9 impeached him based on an accusation of corruption when he was a provincial governor years ago.

The following day Congress installed their congressional leader, Manuel Merino. As a member of the center-right Popular Action Party, he immediately eliminated student benefits. This one-two governmental punch led students to pour spontaneously into the streets. The police reacted to these massive demonstrations with force. But police brutality backfired and brought Merino to resign in less than a week. He was replaced by interim president Francisco Sagasti, an economist who has worked for the World Bank.

Sagasti is regarded as a consensus figure who can take the country to April 2021 elections. As founder of the centrist Partido Morado (Purple Party), a party that did not vote for Vizcarra's impeachment, he does have a party in Congress to back him. As president he must face the aftermath of the police actions, deal with the highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rate in Latin America along with a contracting economy. That economy is based on exports including copper, gold, zinc, textiles, chemicals, and fish meal. It has signed many trade pacts, most recently with China.

Joe Stapleton interviewed Andrea Palacios in North Carolina to discuss the background of Peruvian politics and implications of this struggle for the country's future.

Against the Current: Could you provide a basic rundown of what touched off what's going on in Peru?

Andrea Palacios: On November 9, 2020 President Martín Vizcarra was forced out by the Peruvian Congress, a body that's disliked throughout the country for their corruption. They impeached him under a charge of "immoral incapacity." Vizcarra is facing corruption investigations that have not yet been proven, but it is still an open investigation.

Congress replaced him with Manuel Merino the following day. This was the last straw pushing people to the streets in massive numbers.

Many are saying "We haven't seen these protest numbers since the fall of the dictatorship in 2000."

It's a big deal, but the protests are not necessarily about the impeachment of Vizcarra, who has been accused of

corruption. It is more about generalized corruption and lack of democracy.

ATC: He's not perfect?

AP: Right. Regardless, I think what guided people to the streets was a corrupted Congress that has been a reality for many, many years. It's a Congress that's protected by the Constitution for any crime they can commit. People are saying that Congress made this decision, which destabilized the country at this moment just because they wanted to protect themselves.

The Constitution that was written in 1993, during the dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori, gives complete immunity to congresspeople. Sixty-three of whom (out of 120) still have open investigations, whether for corruption or violence against women, and for which they cannot be tried or judged.

Vizcarra was generally popular because he tried to provide the judiciary with a little bit more power to bring the cases to court. Congress roared, "Hell no, obviously that's what protects us," so they took him down and replaced him with Merino.

This is happening five months before April 2021 elections. Merino is the third president in the last four years, so the country has gone through a lot of changes. That's partly why I say this was the last straw. People are tired of Congress members being under investigation but who cannot be legally tried because the Constitution protects them.

Peru is one of the countries that has been the hardest hit with the pandemic in all Latin America. The fact that Congress would put the country through this kind of instability in the middle of a pandemic meant people saw their self-motivated action as a coup. From the beginning of the demonstrations, it became emblematic to see spray-painted posters on the street, "People against the coup."

ATC: The police murder of two young people, Jack Brian Pintado Sánchez and Jordan Inti Sotelo Camargo, inflamed the protests after they started. Can you tell me a little about them and why that was so galvanizing?

AP: From the first day the protests were predominantly led by young people, very loosely organized mostly through social media. And from the beginning it was clear that the police were ready to attack, and lobbying tear gas cannisters.

When young people saw that the police were attacking in this way, they organized themselves, talking through WhatsApp and other channels and set up brigadas del desactivación ("brigades of deactivation of gas bombs" or "brigades to deactivate bombs.")

They organized themselves, saying, "What do we need? Traffic cones, carbonated water, etc." and with those things that they would find in their households they started organizing.

There were different brigades. If demonstrators got teargassed, "brigades to clean your face" would run and help. There were nurses, doctors, or student doctors — a lot of them students actually — forming first-aid brigades to help the wounded.

Now these brigades are very highly regarded. The newspapers reported their work because they were such a huge part of the protests.

On Saturday, the sixth day of protests, the police violence escalated. They started shooting directly at people, dropping bombs from helicopters, barricading protesters in specific areas, dropping tear gas on them and making sure they couldn't get out.

These things were not reported on Peru's mainstream media right way, but from the beginning I was able to watch, through different friends, Instagram live. I was saying, "Oh my god yes, the helicopters are right there, oh my god, they're being gassed." This was happening at 1AM.

Murder and Memory

Through Instagram live we could see the helicopters dropping along with videos of protesters talking while they were being shot at. It was terrible, it was very violent. This increased police attack took the lives of two young men. One was 24 years old, Inti Sotelo Carmago, and Jack Brian Pintado was 22. The autopsies revealed that both young men had been shot multiple times. Right to this day the police maintain it was not their shots but must have come from protesters. They say "We did not use any violence," even though there are videos showing their violence.

The day these two young people were assassinated over 100 people were wounded and 42 people disappeared. The disappeared were found days later and recounted how the police kidnapped and mistreated them.

The two young men who died have become the face of the movement. People have built altars throughout the city in their names and with their pictures. Written alongside are the words "We will not forget" and "This is the work of memory."

The phrase that's used a lot is memory. I think this alludes to the years of the dictatorship when people were unjustly killed, including a lot of students. It seemed that the country had forgotten. There was so much talk about reconciliation: "Let's forget about ..." and not remember.

These two have become the faces of the protests still happening now. We are reclaiming our history, our memory.

ATC: From what you're hearing from people you are in contact with in Peru, how would you describe the atmosphere of these protests?

AP: Both by what I've been able to watch on social media and hearing from family members there, it's very much youth-led, and much like a festival or a party. Especially at the beginning of the protests, line of drummers would lead off. They would start and then everybody began to dance in the streets. It was a big party.

My cousin told me that the Saturday when that police attack happened down by the Palace of Justice, "It was just music and people were dancing," and there were the sounds of the bomberellas (firecrackers), they're everywhere, which is also very Peruvian because Peru's very into soccer and fireworks are always going off when soccer is happening.

It's those sounds that you encounter with big festivities, where a bunch of people go out into the streets and dance. My cousin was saying "It was just a party and we were dancing and then the police started shooting." That's the description that I get of the atmosphere, a lot of young people just having fun while protesting, having fun dancing, and then being attacked by the police.

ATC: Describe the work your group is doing.

AP: What's been really cool to watch here in the diaspora is that the energy of the protests has affected Peruvians everywhere — to gather and do something collectively.

I think many of us started these conversations feeling we were too far away from home to actually do something. We've always felt like, "What do we do? I'm over here."

Our collective started very organically. I was invited to it by a Peruvian friend whom I barely knew, but this has strengthened our connection. We started as Peruvians knowing each other and inviting others. It started as a WhatsApp group, then we said, "Hey let's meet over Zoom, let's form a collective."

We call ourselves the PUMAS collective. We just selected the name two weeks ago. We are now focused on getting funds to the protesters we are directly connected with. We have been thinking about money for things that were needed, like gas masks and materials for all the brigades, especially the first-aid brigades.

The protests continue, but they've dwindled. Since one of the people in our collective is a therapist, tonight's meeting is discussing the idea of group therapy sessions for the activist protesters and those who have been watching these horrific things. There might be a desire to sit down together and talk through it.

Also, we're forming an Instagram platform in English to educate people about what's happening in Peru. We've noticed it's hard to talk to friends about these events because we don't have resources in English.

It's partly because Peru is a small country of 32 million and the diaspora here is small. We want to have a platform in English that would explain the political situation and the demands of the protests as they continue — especially as the election happens next year — as well as sharing things about our country. We've been discussing a series on Peruvian cumbias, dances, and joys, and things about our culture.

Inspiration from Chile, Bolivia

ATC: Do you feel that some of the other movements in Latin America over the past few months have had any effect on what's going on in Peru?

AP: I saw it from here — the brigades that were organizing themselves were taking cues from those that were organized in Chile when they had big protests last year. They were sharing and watching videos from Chile on how to deactivate bombs.

Even the demands have been shaped by theirs. Chile just voted to change their constitution, which also comes from a dictatorship — the Pinochet dictatorship. Bolivia held their Constitutional Assembly and adopted a new Constitution as well. So, the calls for a new constitution, or the call for a constitutional assembly, definitely follow the steps of Bolivia and Chile. Peru can imagine and call for this because Bolivia has done it and Chile is on the way to doing it.

ATC: What do the protesters want?

AP: It varies. Parents of the people who were wounded or disappeared formed a collective, too. They held a press conference, saying “We want the government or the police to be held accountable for what they’ve done.”

That’s a big one. People are asking, “Who’s guilty for this?” The police are claiming “We didn’t shoot anyone,” and time is passing. Family members of the murdered have publicly asked, “If anyone has a video of my son being killed by police, we need it because they will not believe us.”

The police are threatening to close the case while people are demanding justice.

There’s a big call for a new constitutional assembly, as well. Some people say, “Let’s reform the constitution.” Others say, “This constitution cannot be reformed because it was written under the dictatorship of Fujimori and only benefits the economic interests of the foreign and domestic corporations. We need to change it altogether.”

In the Bolivia they got rid of the old Congress altogether and elected new people. They made a point to include people of Indigenous descent and people from Indigenous nations who could represent themselves. That’s one of the big issues Indigenous people participating in these protests are raising.

Since the onset of what we call the Peruvian Republic, constitutions have never been written for us, especially as we think about Afro-Peruvians or people of Indigenous descent. It was a constitution for Peruvian elites. They wrote it for themselves and left others to face violence.

So, we need a new constitution that would achieve the autonomy of the many Indigenous nations, as Bolivia did.

ATC: How have the class and ethnic and national differences played out in the protests?

AP: It seems to me that the majority of young people in the streets are unified. We want a new constitution, we’re tired of this Congress — it’s corrupt, we can’t reform it, let’s get rid of it.

I think the wrestling is much more with the liberal groups that aren’t necessarily out in the streets, and with established political parties. Even the latest president, Francisco Sagasti, says we don’t need to get rid of the constitution — let’s just reform it, or change one thing or another.

Obviously, Sagasti is super pro-corporations. It wouldn’t make sense for him to ask for anything else.

Roots of Uprising

ATC: What was it that laid the groundwork for these mass uprisings? They didn’t come out of nowhere, and they weren’t totally spontaneous.

AP: In the collective here, we often say, we are gathering because we understand the conditions that took these young people out to the streets are the same ones that took us out of our country.

Many of us emigrated from our country because of the kind of corruption that is happening still, and because of the dictatorship of the 1990s or before.

Living in the United States, I've read in the newspapers that Peru is skyrocketing economically. It is a model for other countries. Supposedly all these neoliberal reforms have made it an example: "Everybody be like Peru!"

I've always been skeptical. Who is benefiting? My family is still struggling; a lot of people are struggling. Especially since the protests have been youth-led and student-led, I think a lot of the foundational issues here are about the impossibility of students getting a job and the impossibility of getting an education.

One of the young protesters who was murdered had to quit his studies because he could not afford to continue. Poverty is a common reality. Neoliberal reforms have opened the country to foreign corporations. The economic and environmental devastation has created huge problems.

In the Andes and the Amazon, communities are being exposed to the pollution of our water, our land, our air. The mass uprising is a combination of a lot of things.

ATC: What role, if any, do the political parties have in the protests?

AP: Here in the USA the Republicans and Democrats are established political parties. In Peru, a lot of times elections are more about personalities and candidates rather than parties.

But the party of former president Manuel Merino was not well regarded. You have more conservative parties that are very pro-police. You have the Partido Morado, which is more liberal, like the Democrats. They don't want to take things too far. Then you have the Communist Party of Peru, which has never received a lot of votes, but had a voice in the protests.

ATC: What should the U.S. Left know about what's going on in Peru?

AP: It's important to be aware that there is a revolution happening in Peru, a country that doesn't often get the media attention because of how small it is, but that has been ravaged by colonialism and even afterward by the elites in Peru for years and years. And today we have foreign corporations, particularly American and Canadian.

At the same time, Peruvians have fought beautifully against all this, and in many different ways. I think in the United States we forget about the global context. In our conversations about the possibilities of building a better life there is little about the global struggle.

As a Peruvian living here — and initially not connected to what is happening in Peru — I understand how necessary it is to pay attention to the global struggle for human dignity.

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