Peru’s elections: a country in search of its identity

Pedro Castillo’s first round victory surprised the country and the region. The rural teacher has an ability to represent the Indigenous and peasant identity while also personifying a discourse of change. As the run-off approaches, Keiko Fujimori has been unable to shake off her father's image of corruption and ensuing destabilization in recent years. The latest surveys show Castillo polling double the voting intentions of Alberto Fujimori’s daughter and he is preparing to transform an economy marked by inequality.

By Alberto Chirif - 1st May 2021

Ever since Peru’s 1979 Political Constitution established a second round of voting when no candidate wins more than half of the valid votes cast in the first round of a presidential election (this excludes blank and invalid votes), there has been only one occasion when the two finalists came from different ends of the Right/Left political spectrum. That was in 1985 when Alan García Pérez, representing APRA (a party that initially had progressive and anti-imperialist leanings), topped the poll, with Alfonso Barrantes Lingán, from Izquierda Unida, coming second. On that occasion, Barrantes withdrew from the ballot: he felt it would be pointless and inappropriate to put the country through a second round given the voter differential between himself and García.

This situation has now repeated itself in the most recent set of elections, albeit with some differences. The Left’s representative, Pedro Castillo of Perú Libre, topped the ballot, while the right-wing candidate, Keiko Fujimori of Fuerza Popular, came second. Ever since the 1990 elections that saw Japanese citizen Alberto Fujimori elected (he falsified his papers to appear Peruvian, claiming he was born on 28 July, Peru’s independence day, no less!), the electorate’s attitude has been one of largely voting against (rather than for) any particular candidate. In other words, their vote indicates a visceral rejection of one candidate rather than any outright support for the other.
In 2001, Alejandro Toledo thus beat Alan García. In 2005, the victory went to Alan García who manipulated the accusation of communism against Ollanta Humala to his gain. In 2011, this latter beat Keiko Fujimori. Alberto Fujimori's daughter was also defeated in the second round in 2016, this time standing against the liberal Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (better known as PPK).

**The stigma of being Alberto Fujimori's daughter**

Although Keiko Fujimori has proved to have a skin tough enough to withstand accusations (as have her inner circle), she is haunted by the spectre of two consecutive defeats in the second round. In addition, she bears the burden of her father's crimes during the 11 years that he – along with the sinister character of Vladimiro Montesinos, the former president's right-hand man – led the country.

Fujimori has been sentenced to 25 years in prison for his part in crimes of murder with malice aforethought, aggravated kidnapping and serious injury; as the mastermind of the Barrios Altos (1991) and La Cantuta (1992) massacres; for the kidnapping of a businessman and a journalist; and for the illegal raid on the home of Trinidad Becerra, wife of Vladimiro Montesinos, his henchman, in search of videos that might incriminate him. Montesinos is also serving a 22-year prison sentence for corruption of public officials, usurpation of functions, money laundering, conspiracy, arms trafficking, aggravated homicide and forced disappearance.

It might be considered unfair to accuse a daughter of her father's deeds but this is not the case: Keiko Fujimori held the position of “first lady” from 1994 to 2000, after her mother brought corruption charges against her husband, Alberto Fujimori. Although the position is a ceremonial one, Keiko and her siblings benefited from State funds embezzled by their father to finance their studies at two universities in the United States.

It has been demonstrated that the salary of a Peruvian president is not enough to support four children studying at US universities. It has also been proven that Montesinos, whom
Alberto Fujimori's children called “uncle”, brought them briefcases of money (USD 10,000 each month) for their university and living expenses. The children were old enough at that time to realize that the handling of this money was irregular and that its origin was illicit.

For Keiko Fujimori, being heir to the most corrupt ruler Peru has ever seen does not seem to phase her.

In the name of the father

From being a daughter of power, Keiko Fujimori has since forged her own career based on the black arts and corruption. First, she engineered the downfall of Pedro Pablo Kuzynski in 2018 and, two years later, that of Martín Vizcarra, who had replaced him in office. Prior to the elections, Keiko was formally charged by the Lava Jato (Car Wash) task force with allegedly receiving illegal contributions for her previous presidential campaigns, including from Brazilian construction company, Odebrecht. The complaint includes 41 other individuals who are accused of organized crime, money laundering, obstruction of justice and false declaration in administrative proceedings. The prosecutor has called for her to receive a 31-year prison sentence. If she does not win this presidential election, she will face trial and possible conviction.

Keiko Fujimori’s defeat in the two previous elections does not mean that her party, Fuerza Popular, is bereft of power on the national political scene. In the 2016 elections, they gained 73 congressmen/women out of a total of 130 in Parliament, although they have lost a large number of those along the way due to their misdeeds. In any case, her party’s presence stretches beyond electoral matters and is rooted in the political structure that her father established during his term of office.

In 1992, Alberto Fujimori dissolved Congress and called for elections to convene a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution. The new Magna Carta established an economic model that protects corporations, especially transnationals, while disempowering workers. This is what the free market in Peru boils down to: benefits and subsidies to companies and an abandonment of workers to their fate.
To ensure the continuity of his model, Fujimori brought the judiciary under his control and, in March 1999, reinforced his primacy over the Armed Forces, forcing them to submit to his government’s arbitrary measures. In addition, he bought up a large part of the press and created new “tabloid” newspapers, the so-called “chicha press”, to defend his measures and denigrate his opponents. He also boasted of having defeated terrorism because, in 1992, Abimael Guzmán, founder and leader of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) was captured.

This was not down to his government’s action, however, but to that of the police. These latter had improved their intelligence strategies over the previous decade, finally resulting in the capture of Shining Path’s most important figure without a drop of blood being spilt. It was also due to the movement’s rejection by an increasingly organized population. In fact, Pedro Castillo was a member of one of these organized peasant patrols. The right wing nevertheless like to describe him as a “terrorist”, and of having formed part of the “Asháninka army”, an organization that fought the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) in the Pichis River and, later, Shining Path in Satipo and the Ene River basin.

**Fujimori’s economic model**

Peru’s tax system operates in the service of business. This has been very clearly explained by the economist Pedro Francke. Incredibly, casinos, bingos, horse racing and lotteries do not pay the General Sales Tax (IGV) that ordinary citizens have to pay on their medicines, food, clothing and basic services. Nor do the banks pay it: this is a sector that makes more than 20% per year while paying out barely 1% on its customers’ savings. At the same time, banks charge interest rates of over 40% to small- and medium-sized companies and 45% to consumers.

Private universities also enjoy exemptions to the tune of 1,783 million soles in IGV and also avoid paying 104 million in income tax. These private universities have bred like rabbits and many of their managers have entered politics and even run for president. Needless to say, this market for education has produced an education of the lowest quality. In addition,
the mining sector benefits from an accelerated depreciation of its investments and receives tax “rebates”. Between 2014 and 2017, these returns totalled 6 billion soles annually (more than one and a half million dollars).

The agro-export sector also benefits from a reduction in income tax, being half that paid by other companies, and it can reclaim the IGV paid on purchases of equipment, inputs and construction contracts. Agribusiness further benefits from scaled down employment rights: the working day for farmers is 12 hours and overtime is only paid over and above that number (for other companies, the working day is eight hours and overtime is paid at an additional 25% on working days and 50% on holidays); the daily wage is 31 soles (USD 8.20) and includes Length of Service Payments (which in other cases provide an extra 1.3 monthly salaries per year). Companies further benefit from reduced costs when laying off employees and also pay lower social security contributions.

Anecdotally, the measures in favour of the agro-export sector are the result of a law passed by a minister who was in office for only eight months, between June and November 2000, when Alberto Fujimori fled the country and resigned from the presidency by fax. This minister was an agro-exporter himself who, after leaving public office, returned to his company to reap the benefits of the law that he had passed. This mechanism, known as the “revolving door”, is common practice in this country.

Subsequently, between May 2016 and October 2018, that same minister held the position of General Secretary of Fuerza Popular but was forced to resign after it was discovered that he had delivered doctored audios to a television channel in Lima in an attempt to discredit the testimony of an airline pilot who had accused an important leader of his party, Joaquín Ramírez, of money laundering. This former minister is one of the 41 people who have been denounced, together with Keiko Fujimori, by the special prosecutor in the Lava Jato case.
Fujimorism and the roots of plundering

The set of policies that Alberto Fujimori enacted has remained intact throughout subsequent governments and has consolidated the accumulation of wealth in just a few hands, at the expense of the national heritage and terrible working conditions. The book by economist Germán Alarco, *Riqueza y desigualdad en el Perú* [Wealth and Inequality in Peru], confronts us with the brutal abyss that is present in the country. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of millionaires with productive assets of more than USD 1,000,000 doubled, those with more than USD 100,000,000 quadrupled, and billionaires —those with more than one thousand million dollars — multiplied by five. Between 2014 and 2016, Peru thus had the highest level of inequality of all countries of the Pacific Alliance: the per capita income of the poorest 10% stands at USD 965 per year, while that of the richest 10% is USD 20,141: 20 times more.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Data Processing (INEI), informal employment stood at 75.2% in 2020. Formal workers account for 31% of employment in urban areas but this drops to only 3.8% in the rural sector. The same institution revealed that 20.2% of the country's population was living in poverty in 2020. The criteria for measuring this seem inadequate, however, since people were only considered to be poor when their monthly expenditure was less than 352 soles (USD 93).

So this was the situation as the country approached these last elections, in which 24 parties participated. The Right was divided between Keiko Fujimori, someone from Opus Dei who stated that he tortured his body with sackcloth and had not married because he was in love with the Virgin Mary, and another who, while not the author of the decrees that led to the “Baguazo” tragedy in 2009 in which 33 citizens died and an Armed Forces officer disappeared, was always supportive of their aim: the elimination of the collective property of Indigenous and peasant communities so that this could be “capitalized upon” and converted into prosperous businesses.
From identity to discourse of change

Pedro Castillo was a union leader in the teachers’ movement and a member of the peasant patrols of Cajamarca, a type of organization created to combat cattle rustling and which played a central role in the downfall of Shining Path. There are several factors that can explain his success but one very important one is identity. Peru is a country whose Indigenous and Andean identity has suffered at the hands of the prevailing and brutal racism of both the Conquest and then the Republic. Cholos (‘peasants’ or ‘Indians’) are tolerated by those in power provided they are of use to the oligarchy.

The search for identity is so strong that, in the 1990 elections, the population preferred Alberto Fujimori because, after all, a Japanese person seemed more similar to the typical Indigenous and peasant phenotype than Peruvians of European descent such as Mario Vargas Llosa. Although Alejandro Toledo bore these physical characteristics, he sought to differentiate himself by putting on an affected voice or forgetting words in Spanish to show that he had studied at Harvard. In addition to his physical characteristics, Castillo’s status as a teacher (one of the few professions accessible to people with fewer resources) has been important in attracting votes from those who recognize the merit of coming from the grassroots.

Another factor that may explain his victory in the first round is the type of campaign Castillo has run. He has been less concerned with filling the squares in the big cities as he has been with visiting small towns all over the country. Almost all of Peru's poorest districts voted for this rural teacher. His campaign was furthermore not based on television advertising but rather word of mouth and radio campaigns.

The most important thing, however, has been that Castillo represents a discourse of change and renewal of politics in a country that has been enduring an onslaught from what has been described as a brutish and hostile (‘achorado’) right wing (“DBA”). Achorado is a Peruvian word that comes from “choro” or “chorizo”, i.e., thief. Although the connotation is not so far from the truth, in this case it refers to the thuggish attitude of the
Once the Shining Path uprising had been defeated, something that was largely due to the work of the police and the popular sectors, the DBA became emboldened and began to implement brutal and exploitative conditions. They forgot that while Shining Path’s methods were perverse, the group was born out of the terrible oppression suffered by a majority of the people. The *brutish and hostile right wing* completely overlook this fact, however, and, in contrast, focus on claiming that the insurrection was a consequence of foreign intervention, denying that it was due to the concrete and objective conditions of the Peruvian reality. Now they no longer blame Cuba but rather Maduro and Evo Morales.

Faced with the more intellectual Left, represented by *Juntos por el Perú* and Verónica Mendoza, who has an excellent government plan and a great team of collaborators, Pedro Castillo’s *Perú Libre* has borne in mind the fact that people do not read or decide their vote by analyzing great plans but rather vote according to a message that responds to their concerns: employment, health, education and dignity. In addition, Castillo has responded to accusations of authoritarianism and perpetuation in power. The DBA forgets that it was Alberto Fujimori who perpetuated himself in office for a decade: had he not negotiated arms with Colombia’s Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in exchange for coca, something not tolerated by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), he might have remained in power longer.

At the time of writing, voting intentions for Pedro Castillo are double those of Keiko Fujimori. There is, however, still more than a month to go before the second round and, in that time, the brutish and hostile right wing will undoubtedly turn all guns blazing on a candidate who could offer a profound change of direction for the future of this country.

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