Turning the city into a village: people are pouring into Peru’s capital protesting against institutionalized racism

Since Dina Boluarte took office, violence against the community has not stopped. Repression and deaths are greater in the Southern region of Peru, where there is a majority of Quechua and Aymara individuals. Autonomous governments and Indigenous organizations were the first ones to speak out against racism by the State. While the government is trying to delegitimize these protests by accusing the demonstrators of committing terrorism, the collective organization is gaining power and representativeness without an actual leader.

By Kathia Carrillo – February 1st 2023

“We will not allow them to continue this ‘riot’ here in Lima. It will not be effective,” said Prime Minister of Peru, Alberto Otárola, after the massacre that took place in Juliaca on January 9. In this city of the Puno region, 17 racialized individuals lost their lives due to repression by the police and the Armed Forces. The ‘riot’ he is referring to is the massive arrival of demonstrators from different regions of the country, particularly, from Aymara and Quechua territories in the South, with the purpose of demanding the resignation of President Dina Boluarte.

Since the ousting of Pedro Castillo on December 7, 2022, after he had attempted to dissolve Congress, there have been massive protests all throughout the country, especially in regions where the Indigenous populations are a majority. Additionally, those places with a greater number of Quechua and Aymara people – that is, the South – have suffered the most violent repression and have the highest number of deaths.
By analyzing the medical records of 50 people who were wounded or murdered by high speed firearms, the digital platform Salud con Lupa discovered that many of the shots had been fired at short range and at chest and abdomen level, where the vital organs are. After the Juliaca massacre on January 9, the Institute of Legal Medicine confirmed that the bullets used by the police were targeting the head and the chest, which may be considered out-of-court murders.

Racism

It is impossible to deny the structural racism behind the violent government’s response to the conflict. During their visit to Peru, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights delegation highlighted the ethnical and racial components to the violations of human rights registered. International news organizations, such as The Guardian, have emphasized that one of the main reasons of this social collapse is the gap between the Peruvian elite and the Indigenous Peoples, the peasants and workers, who have been historically marginalized.

However, this structural racism finds its justification in a belief that has been internalized by the majority of Peruvians: “poor people are poor because they want to”. According to OXFAM’s National Survey on Perceptions of Inequality, 59% of the respondents believe that by working hard it is possible to become rich.

The first ones to speak out against racism were the autonomous governments and the Indigenous organizations. The Autonomous Territorial Government of the Wampis Nation (in Spanish, GTANW) located in the Peruvian Amazon disapproved of the “racist violence used by the Peruvian Government” and blamed “the greedy, incapable and shameful politicians whose modus operandi depends on corruption because they have only learned to earn money the easy way, by dehumanizing the people and destroying our sources of sustenance”.
The Awajun Autonomous Territorial Government (in Spanish, GTAA), which is the second largest Indigenous People in the Amazon, also held that “the problems of inequality that have been historically postponed because of the marginalization and discrimination of the most forgotten peoples of the country” are the main reasons for this crisis.

Moreover, the National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Women (in Spanish, ONAMIAP) condemned the “institutionalization of racism” after Alberto Otárola Peñaranda had been appointed as Prime Minister. He is a lawyer and former Ministry of Defense and, as such, he was directly liable for the first murders that occurred from December 10-19, 2022.

Also the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (in Spanish, AIDESEP) warned us that “corrupt and racist mafias have taken office and are part of the National Congress”. Additionally, it demanded the cancellation of projects that are in favor of extractive companies that affect the Amazon and the Indigenous peoples who are in voluntary isolation and initial contact.

**Performative inclusion and instrumentalization of the indigenous culture**

After the first murders in Apurimac, Ayacucho and Junín that took place in December, Dina Boluarte started a desperate campaign to legitimize her government, to prove she was only rejected by a minority, and to show that other Indigenous Peoples supported her. In view of that, her motto was *Dialogue for Peace*. As a consequence, all the ministries organized open agenda meetings with alleged Indigenous representatives from the Amazon and with organizations which representativeness and agendas are questionable.

This is exactly what happened in a meeting with the supposed leaders of an organization called “the seven peoples of Manseriche”. Manseriche is a district that covers an area of 54,000 hectares and is home to 42 native communities. It overlaps with the ancestral lands of the Awajun and the Wampis and it is located in the Amazonian province of Datem del Marañón, Loreto region. It also has a history of oil spills that have affected its social fabric.
As a consequence of this, different organizations, remedial companies and opportunistic leaders have sprung into existence and taken advantage of the peoples’ claims by benefiting from agreements with the government and other companies. The GTANW issued a statement denying any involvement with that organization or any other that have met with the Ministry of Housing and with the Prime Minister’s Office.

Another meeting took place in the Ministry of Culture with the community leaders of the Loreto oil region, as part of the “Closing the Gap Plan” (established during the former government), which includes development projects for the communities, but administered by the town council. The government also promoted a meeting with the Regional Association of Indigenous Peoples of the Central Rainforest, even though such organization had agreed with the AIDESEP on being part of the “permanent movement”.

This performative inclusion and division within the Indigenous movements of the Amazon was possible due to the actions of the Vice Minister of Intercultural Affairs, Rocilda Nunta, the Amazon leader who took office along with Pedro Castillo. After the massacre in Juliaca, the GTANW and the GTAA condemned State violence and the instrumentalization of First Nations communities “used with the purpose of designing their desperate campaigns, delegitimizing the protest and spreading fear among the population.” Moreover, they called upon the Indigenous officials to assess the possibility of resigning so as not to be an accomplice to the massacre. As a result, the ONAMIAP was more categorical and demanded the resignation of Nunta.

Stigmatization and terruqueo: grounds for violence

On January 18, there was an oil spill caused by an attack to the Oleoducto Norperuano in the Indigenous lands of the Awajun Pantaam, in the Amazon region. The spill occurred when two oil rigs belonging to the Awajun people, the Comité de Lucha de Condorcanqui (Condorcanqui Fight Committee) and the Comité del Distrito de Imaza (District of Imaza Committee), had started protesting and demanding Dina Boluarte’s resignation.
Very quickly, the attack was attributed to the Awajun and Wampis protesters, which allowed Boluarte administration to declare a state of emergency in the Amazon region. Both committees along with the GTAA and the GTANW denied any role in the attack and condemned the political use of the actions to delegitimize Awajun’s protests. They added that these attacks are usually committed by remedial companies because they have the machines that are necessary to make the repairs and also because they benefit from environmental tragedies.

This suspicion cast on the Amazon Indigenous People takes place in a context of a racist discourse that brands them as primitive, savages, and rude. As a consequence, government officials and the media accuse them of being “vandals”, “violent”, and also “terrorists”.

In Peru, terruqueo means to blame someone for the crime of terrorism. Terruquear should be punishable by law because there already is a crime called defamation that implies accusing someone without any evidence. However, this act of terruqueo is taken lightly and it stigmatizes and delegitimizes protesters. In addition to evidencing the disdain for Indigenous Peoples, terruqueo also dehumanizes them with the purpose of justifying violent actions that aim at eliminating them.

**The Media and the government’s discourse**

On January 21, a police armored tank arrived at the vicinity of San Marcos National University where demonstrators from Southern Peru were taking shelter. It destroyed the gate where a sign that read “You will not kill with hunger nor with bullets” was hanging. This phrase was the motto of a neighborhood demonstration in 1989 after the murder of María Huapaya, a social leader, by the terrorist group Sendero Luminoso. In the police report, they refer to her as a person “who encouraged acts of violence.”

The images of the 193 individuals who remained on campus and were subjected to harassment were seen all over the world. In a video, there is an old Quechua lady being abused by the police after being ordered to lie down on the floor. After being released, the
woman said she was told racist insults based on her peasant origin. In addition to police abuse, the National Coordinator of Human Rights registered that many Quechua people were forced to sign documents without an interpreter present. Moreover, senior individuals with preexisting medical conditions were made to spend the night in small prisons.

On the day of the Juliaca massacre, Dina Boluarte was taking part in a “space for dialogue” known as National Agreement when she heard of the first demonstrator being murdered by the police. Her reaction was to say she did not understand what the demonstrators wanted or why there was so much violence. Days later, she made this statement: “I will not resign. I made a commitment with Peru and not with such a small group that is making the nation bleed.” Additionally, she expressed her doubts as to the financing of the protests.

From the beginning, the government and the media associated the protest with various interests aiming at “destroying the institutions and democracy.” At first, they pointed out that the demonstrators were financed by drug dealers and illegal miners. Later on, once the protest had intensified in the Puno region, they accused former Bolivian President, Evo Morales, of being an instigator. He was, therefore, banned from entering Peru. Finally, with the involvement of leaders of the Frente de Defensa del Pueblo de Ayacucho, the government held they were part of the terrorist group called Sendero Luminoso. This information makes it impossible to believe that Indigenous and peasant communities, unions, and organizations can organize and finance large-scale protests.

Lack of leadership

Stigmatization is related to a lack of intercultural understanding as to the collective dynamics of the peoples. What is happening in Peru has no precedent. The last time people from different regions poured into Lima to overthrow the government was in 2000, in the so called “March from the Four Corners” (in Spanish, Marcha de los cuatro suyos), which put an end to Fujimori’s administration. Even though many people call this one “the second march from the four corners”, the differences are remarkable.
This time, there seem to be no opportunistic people or political leaders who are willing to take advantage of the situation in order to gain power. Pedro Castillo, who turned his back to his roadmap and welcomed corruption, is far from becoming the “savior of democracy”. Antauro Humala, leader of the Etnocacerista movement, who after serving his sentence had seen an increase in public approval, particularly in rural sectors and some left-wing supporters, decided against assuming the role of political leader by acknowledging Dina Boluarte’s administration in a public space which was full of her opponents.

The lack of a visible and centralized leadership unsettles a social group that is used to receiving orders from an archetypical leader, instead of a communal group. Acknowledging the power of a collective organization, which was the ancestral way in which the Indigenous Peoples survived, is finally recognizing its own agency. Indeed, it means understanding “others” as equals and acknowledging their ability to bring change by their own means and initiative.

Turning a city into a village is to strip it of its racism, it will teach the privileged, the powerful, the indifferent how to remember the ancestral strength of the collective social fabric and the unbreakable solidarity that arises even out of institutionalized and racist violence.

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