Peru: they messed with the wrong generation

It is difficult to explain what happened in our country to outsiders. Even in the country, we are not able to grasp the dimension of the events. The facts are clear, they are vicious and they hurt: two young men murdered, Bryan Pintado and Inti Sotelo; dozens of protesters wounded; excessive force used and shots fired aiming at people’s bodies; enforced disappearances; sexual abuse and torture; mass arrests. So many crimes committed by the State, so much pain in less than a week. There is only one thing to hope for: for the first time in the history of Peru, hundreds of thousands of young people took to the streets to protest against the unconstitutional removal of the Peruvian president.

By Ana María Vidal Carrasco - November 24th, 2020

Since 2001, when the dictatorship established during the 90s ended, Peruvian democracy has been accompanied by a neoliberal economic policy based on the export of raw materials. This caused economic growth concentrated in a few hands. Access to basic rights such as health, education and decent formal employment is still not guaranteed to the great majority of people. Particularly, to the indigenous peoples and to the communities directly affected by the extraction of minerals or hydrocarbons, or illegal logging. On the contrary, their living conditions continue to worsen.

Outside Lima, these rights are even more limited due to environmental pollution, constant oil spills in the Amazon, the growth of illegal economies and little State presence. Further away from the country’s capital, this reduction in rights has been paired with state repression and criminalization against the protests. Having said that, the repression was not felt in Lima. It was an unfamiliar scenario, too far from the city.

At the same time, the twenty-year democratic spring was consumed by corruption. Since 2001, every president has been investigated or has been detained for corruption allegations related to construction companies. Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) is being held
in preventive custody in the United States and is waiting to be extradited to Peru; Alan García (2006-2011) committed suicide when he was about to be detained; Ollanta Humada (2011-2016) has been detained and the prosecutor’s investigation is pending; and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (2016-2018) is serving house arrest. This is how the story begins.

By the end of 2017, a series of events connecting the then president Kuczynski with acts of corruption were discovered. After surviving two bids to impeach him by a Congress controlled by fujimorists and anti-rights religious groups, Kuczynski resigns. The Vice President took office: Martín Vizcarra.

When Vizcarra assumed the Presidency, political turmoil was renewed: great corruption in the justice system was revealed. Several audio files were leaked and it was possible to hear high-court officials negotiating convictions, including one where a judge was negotiating the conviction or acquittal of the rapist of an eleven-year-old girl. Vizcarra reacted. He dismantled key structures within the justice system and initiated a minor political and judicial reform. People took to the streets to applaud. Nevertheless, the Congress at that time firmly opposed to those changes. Using a solution provided by the Constitution, Vizcarra dissolved Congress and called for legislative elections.

The people’s support was complete. In the cities, Vizcarra was seen as the first president to take concrete actions against corruption, against fujimorism and against anti-rights religious groups. For the first time, the political model seemed to be changing. However, the economic model did not change. It continued the tendency followed by previous administrations and the economic dependency on raw materials remained. At the same time, the regulations that allowed law enforcement officers to use force during protests were perfected. The indigenous peoples were affected the most: their rights continued to be violated, trampled.

In January 2020, new members of the Congress were elected. One hundred and thirty new representatives, who would remain in office until July 2011 and could not be reelected, were appointed. People believed it was impossible for this new Congress to be as bad as the previous one. However, it can always be worse.
It was weeks before the end of the year, only five months before an election was called to replace this new Congress and Vizcarra. All of a sudden, there appeared corruption reports against Vizcarra for acts committed before being elected president. In the middle of a pandemic that has and still is hitting hard, the Congress started an unconstitutional and illogical impeachment process. When everything seemed to be back to normal, another impeachment process was initiated. While the Congress insisted on removing President Martín Vizcarra, people took to the streets to express their wish to let him finish his term.

**The Coup D’état**

The intentions of those who supported the impeachment were clear to everybody: they wanted to retain power for longer; to free political prisoners such as Alberto Fujimori and Antauro Humala; the most conservative groups aimed at halting the attempts to achieve gender equality and women’s rights; and the economic interests of businesspeople emerged.

Stakes were so high that the Congress did not listen to the people. In the afternoon of November 9, by adjusting the institute of impeachment for moral incapacity, the Parliament ousted Vizcarra with 105 votes, out of a total of 130 members. The president of Congress, Manuel Merino, took office. At that moment, chaos erupted.

That same night, the pressure by young people protesting exceeded expectations. The generation of old politicians did not hesitate to copy the methods and crimes committed by the dictatorship of the 90s. Thus, in Lima, they repeated the same abuses used against the indigenous peoples who protested. They thought that an iron-fist approach would calm the youth. They were wrong.

From November 9, the capital city of the country lived in chaos. Police force was excessive. Thousands of undercover police officers detained and beat protesters, they closed streets, used tear gas and fired shots against the bodies and heads of the young people. Rubber bullets were used not to leave proof of the weapons employed. People were arrested with evidence fabricated by the police. Detained women were undressed and sexually abused. Lima experienced terror caused by the State.
However, the response of young people increased due to this repression; the spontaneous protests organized on social media in different parts of the city were crowded. Pictures and videos were shared on Twitter, WhatsApp, Tik Tok and Instagram. Their rage was expressed with jokes, memes, and mockery against the loathed political class. The most visible face of the protests were young women: marching, dancing, deactivating tear gas grenades. Those women who believe in different forms of feminism and started reporting gender violence in the last few years as well as the shameful lack of action by the police.

The traditional political class, based on political parties that no longer represent people, did not understand what was happening. They believed there was someone who led the youth and thought it was impossible for them to self-convene so fast. They never understood how young people – beaten up as they are, stripped of many of their rights and seemingly apolitical and hedonistic – could make such strong demands. And these young people did not ask for Vizcarra to take office; they wanted to prevent what they understood from the very beginning. They wanted to avoid a coup d’état and a dictatorship from perpetuating.

The end of the dictatorship

On Saturday, November 14, police violence became the epitome of cruelty. Two students aged 22 and 24 were killed, Inti Sotelo and Bryan Pintado. Pain was infinite. It was not just the streets in downtown Lima, it was the entire city. The whole country was beating as one, shouting and pot-banging in protest.

After those deaths, the recently appointed ministers started to leave one by one. On Sunday, Manuel Merino resigned. The dictatorship was over. On Monday, a solution was sought. Francisco Sagasti was chosen among the few congressmen who voted against the impeachment and became the new President of Congress. As such, Sagasti sworn in as interim President of the Republic until July 28, 2021.

In this context, an old demand made by the left-wing political parties resurfaced: the reform of the Political Constitution. The main argument is that the economic model applied for the last 20 years – a model that disregards rights – is based on the 1993
Constitution drafted during Fujimori’s dictatorship. Until recently, this demand had not been embraced by the people.

However, with these protests, the people – and particularly, the youth – became aware of the need of a new Constitution. Those who are still protesting demand a constitutional process and the reform of the police. The anger and pain caused by the repression are still felt. They seek a new Constitution and they do so in order to guarantee more rights.

Faced with these demands, Sagasti and his new cabinet have given a conservative response and they mentioned that the new Constitution will be overseen by the next administration. Regarding the violent police repression, at first, they said it was the fault of a few, but due to popular pressure, they have announced major changes, such as the retirement of 15 high-ranking officers.

Sagasti’s administration is not safe yet. The 105 congress members who voted for Vizcarra’s impeachment may do the same to him or they could refuse the vote of confidence to the new cabinet. There is still no calm in Peru. Another coup d’état is still feared.

Nevertheless, faced with the political cruelty experienced in the last few days, the youth used democracy to oust an illegitimate government. What still persists is the economic model based on extractivism and the limitation of rights. The new Minister of Labor communicated its intention to publish labor policy without the agreement of the unions; and the Minister of Energy and Mining announced that in order to accelerate mining projects, they will propose to eliminate the right to prior consultation of indigenous peoples. For the indigenous peoples in Peru everything has been changing for the last 500 years to prevent things from changing.

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