

Fujimori forced to cede on second round vote in Peru

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The decision by the Peruvian government to hold a second round of presidential elections following revelations of massive fraud in the first phase of voting earlier this month represents a severe blow to the 10-year-old dictatorial regime of President Alberto Fujimori.

Faced with massive nationwide protests as well as mounting pressure from Washington and Europe, the regime backed off from its apparent attempt to steal the election in the first round of balloting April 9. After dragging the vote count out for three days, it announced that the incumbent had fallen just 0.2 percent short of the needed outright majority of the vote. Political analysts in Peru have expressed the opinion that the Fujimori regime was prepared to claim an outright victory, but held back in announcing a final vote total to see if the mass protests would evaporate and the pressure from abroad ease up.

The date for a run-off election between Fujimori and his challenger, Alejandro Toledo, has yet to be set, but is supposed to take place within two months.

The first round of voting saw myriad indicators of ballot fraud. For example, at a number of polling stations, ballots did not include the name of Toledo or his party "Peru Posible." In many areas, the number of voters exceeded the number of those who had registered. Opposition members said that at many of the centers, dead people were named as poll watchers, only to have activists of Peru 2000, Fujimori's party, take their place. In other areas, voting places were changed at the last minute by the military and the police, which were both deployed in large numbers. The official results, moreover, did not match any of the exit polls conducted by various institutions, showing a much tighter race.

"Something very sinister is happening in this last

stage of the electoral process," said Eduardo Stein, head of an Organization of American States observer mission. Referring to Fujimori's last-minute rebound in the official results, Stein added, "There is no convincing explanation in this respect."

The technical fraud after the balloting was only the final stage in the rigging of the election. Fujimori had paved the way to his run for an unprecedented third five-year term by engineering the sacking of the majority of the members of the country's high court who opposed a rewriting of the Peruvian constitution.

Opposition candidates, meanwhile, were virtually frozen out by both broadcast and print media that have either been bought or intimidated by the government and its supporters. Most Peruvians never heard or read anything expressing the views of the eight opposition candidates who initially opposed Fujimori, all of whom were subjected to a "dirty war" of slanderous reporting.

Those journalists who dared criticize the Peruvian president have been the targets of intimidation, death threats and violence. This campaign is widely believed to have been organized by Vladimir Montesinos, the de facto head of the country's secret police, the National Intelligence Service. The former Peruvian army officer, linked by various reports to both the Central Intelligence Agency and drug traffickers, is considered the power behind Fujimori's throne and the organizer of some of the regime's more bloodthirsty acts of repression.

US pressure over the vote count prompted Fujimori followers to adopt an uncharacteristic—and somewhat ludicrous, given the close collaboration between the US and Peru over the past decade—tone of nationalist and even anti-imperialist outrage over "foreign intervention."

"Our elections and our laws cannot and will not be

dictated by [Secretary of State Madeleine] Albright," declared Francisco Tudela, Fujimori's vice-presidential running mate and Peru's former ambassador to the United Nations. "I have never seen this level of US intervention in South America before. They have tried to do it in Central America in the past, but Peru is different.... My country is not a banana republic."

Toledo is a candidate who enjoys Washington's confidence. A 54-year-old US-educated economist, he has served as a functionary in the World Bank and has repeatedly expressed his desire to "build on the successes of President Alberto Fujimori."

While running a populist campaign pledging to do something to create jobs for the million new unemployed created in the Fujimori decade, Toledo has steadfastly assured Washington and Wall Street that he has no intention of moving away from free market policies. Much of his electioneering has emphasized his Indian roots, while crudely highlighting Fujimori's Japanese origin.

Fujimori gave a preview of the type of campaign he will wage in the second round, telling a crowd of 5,000 in a poor neighborhood of Lima that he would not "open the door to the return of chaos and violence" by allowing his opponent to win. Afterwards the crowd, many of them brought in on chartered buses, stoned opposition supporters.

Should it prove both possible and necessary, there are few in Peru who doubt that Fujimori and his followers would not consider the option of a military coup to prevent his removal from office. His government has long served as a civilian front for what amounts to military rule over the country which, through its amnesty laws and controlled judiciary, has protected military officers guilty of massacres and other gross human rights violations.

Throughout his 10 years in power, Fujimori has repeatedly resorted to dictatorial measures. Elected as a virtual unknown in 1990, two years later he conducted what amounted to a presidential coup, closing down the Congress and imposing martial law. The military was given a free hand to carry out a murderous counterinsurgency campaign against the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas. Fujimori again gained international notoriety with the storming of the Japanese ambassador's residence after a four-month siege in April 1997, killing 14 leftist rebels.

This relentless military repression, combined with the government's "free market" economic policy, has enjoyed the support and collaboration of the US throughout most of the decade.

Washington's sudden concern with democratic niceties in Peru is rooted in a fear that the economic crisis and political stability gripping the entire Andean region is creating conditions for potential revolutionary upheaval. In recent weeks martial law has been declared in Bolivia to quell mass protests. Ecuador recently saw the fall of its elected president in a brief military coup, and Venezuela has been gripped by political turmoil since former coup leader Hugo Chavez came to power. Meanwhile, the US is preparing a sharp escalation of its military intervention against guerrilla movements in Colombia.

While embraced in the past as a bulwark of stability, Fujimori's continued rule in the face of growing opposition from the Peruvian people is increasingly seen in Washington as another potentially destabilizing factor.



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