Washington bows to Fujimori's vote fraud

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The Clinton administration's precipitous back pedaling on its initial rejection of the rigged election in Peru is an expression of an inherently contradictory policy toward both that Andean country and Latin America as a whole.

In the immediate aftermath of the May 28 runoff vote, an administration spokesman declared its results invalid. Referring to Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, he added, “no president emerging from such a flawed electoral process can claim legitimacy.”

Within one day, however, the State Department issued a correction. “No decision has been made about any steps to be taken,” said a spokesman, “nor are we presently considering taking any unilateral actions.”

Instead, Washington opted for putting the issue before the OAS. There, Fujimori's ham-fisted vote rigging got a fairly sympathetic reception. Latin America's corrupt bourgeois regimes had no interest in seeing any precedents set on the legitimacy of national elections. The ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in Mexico has long ruled through methods similar to Fujimori's and may resort to them again to fend off opposition candidates in a July 2 national election. The pseudo-populist Venezuelan regime of former coup leader Hugo Chavez was set to stage a similar electoral fraud on May 28 before it fell apart, and will now also be going to the polls in July. Regimes in Ecuador and Paraguay, which have survived military coups only through accommodations to the military, likewise have no interest in making an issue over the undemocratic character of the Peruvian vote.

Meanwhile, Peru's military swung its support behind Fujimori with the country's armed forces commander, Gen. Jose Villanueva Ruestra, presiding over a June 8 ceremony swearing allegiance and subordination to the civilian president. Constitutionally, such a ceremony is to take place on the day the elected president is inaugurated, scheduled in Fujimori's case for July 28, after the country's Congress validates the vote. Moving up the oath amounted to a warning that the military is prepared to suppress any mass opposition to Fujimori's serving a third five-year term.

“This unconstitutional recognition constitutes in real terms a new coup d'etat,” said the opposition in a joint statement on the military's action.

Both the Clinton administration and much of the US media had sharply criticized the Fujimori regime's trampling on the rights of the opposition candidate, the Stanford-trained economist Alejandro Toledo, its muzzling of the national press and gross manipulation of the voting.

The Peruvian president's name was placed on the ballot through the forging of a million signatures. The media, with less than a handful of exceptions, denied any coverage to Toledo's campaign. Having been bought, intimidated or shut down by the government, both television and print outlets served as pliant propaganda arms for the Fujimori regime, while limiting reports on his opponent to slanders about his fathering an illegitimate child or being an alcoholic. Gangs of thugs frequently broke up opposition election rallies or sabotaged their sound systems.

There was ample evidence that government funds were diverted to finance Fujimori's reelection campaign. One journalist claimed to have a videotape showing Vladimiro Montesinos, the shadowy head of Peru's secret police agency, meeting with election officials to fix the vote. He paid a brutal price for this revelation, as plainclothes agents assaulted him and sawed his arm to the bone while demanding he give up the evidence.

It was largely US pressure that forced the Peruvian president to face a second-round contest with his rival. Within Peru, the US embassy was widely seen as tacitly backing Toledo's challenge, while in Washington Congress passed a resolution threatening sanctions and Fujimori earned even the condemnation of Sen. Jesse Helms, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the first round, a delegation sent from the Organization of American States (OAS) issued a statement saying, “The Peruvian electoral process is far from one that could be considered free and fair.” After the Fujimori regime failed to make changes demanded by the OAS, the organization's monitors left the country rather than lend credibility to the vote. For his part, Toledo boycotted the race, saying a fraud was inevitable.

The Clinton administration's criticism of Fujimori over the electoral fraud is the latest chapter in a decade-old relationship in which Washington has frequently touted the Peruvian regime as a model for the rest of the continent. In a 1997 visit to Lima, for example, the White House special envoy to Latin America, Thomas McLarty, claimed that Peru—“where human rights are increasingly respected”—is “fairly bursting with hope for a better tomorrow.”

A year later, however, the State Department's human rights report referred to the routine torture of Peruvian prisoners by methods that included “electric shock, water torture, asphyxiation [and] hanging of victims by a rope.”

Coming to power in 1990 in a challenge to the old political establishment, Fujimori introduced radical neo-liberal policies that curbed runaway inflation while bankrupting sections of national industry and plunging masses of the country's poorest into even greater destitution.

At the same time, he unleashed the country's military and the SIN (National Intelligence Service) secret police apparatus. Waging a bloody counterinsurgency campaign against the Maoist Shining Path peasant guerrilla movement, the regime placed much of the country under emergency rule, massacring thousands of civilians considered “sympathizers” of the guerrillas. Thousands guilty of nothing more than speaking out against the government have been tortured or sentenced to long prison terms by hooded military courts. An amnesty imposed by the regime, meanwhile, has exonerated military and police commanders for mass killings and torture.

The fraudulent election is only the latest in a series of extra-constitutional measures utilized by Fujimori to consolidate his authoritarian regime. In 1992 he used the army to shut down the Congress and five years later he paved the way for this year's election by sacking the country's highest court after its justices ruled that he could not run for a third term.

Washington has generally turned a blind eye to these dictatorial measures because of Fujimori's unwavering commitment to International Monetary Fund policies. For 10 years he has led Latin America's governments in slashing state spending, ending subsidies, privatizing public enterprises and implementing other austerity measures.

Peru has also become a linchpin in the escalating US military intervention throughout the region, and is particularly key to Washington's

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plans for expanded counterinsurgency operations in Colombia. Hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid have been funneled into the country in the name of the “drug war.” US anti-drug aid rose from $56.3 million in 1998 to $87 million in 1999, and this year's assistance is expected to reach $150 million. The aid includes more US training of Peruvian police and military and the building of military airstrips and bases.

At the same time, human rights violations have led to a formal restriction on providing military hardware to the regime.

If the Clinton administration has criticized Fujimori and expressed sympathy for his electoral rival, Toledo, it is out of fear that the former may only be aggravating social discontent and recognition that it has nothing to fear from the latter.

From a policy standpoint, there is little to differentiate the Peruvian incumbent from his rival. Toledo, a Stanford and Harvard-educated economist, has served as a functionary of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, helping promote the same policies that the Fujimori regime has implemented through repressive force.

Toledo waged a demagogic campaign portraying himself as the “Cholo,” a pejorative term for the country's indigenous population, and denouncing Fujimori as the “Chino,” an oriental foreigner. He won substantial support both from the Peruvian middle class and from the old oligarchy which had supported Mario Vargas Llosa and Javier Perez de Cuellar in previous electoral challenges to Fujimori.

In the second round of the election Toledo called for a boycott, a luxury that few Peruvians could afford. Voting is a requirement for the country's citizens to revalidate identity documents without which they cannot conduct any legal business, including cashing checks. For public employees, not voting meant being fired the next day. The boycott call, combined with demonstrations that turned into violent confrontations with security forces, alienated some of his middle class supporters.

As a result, out of 14 million eligible voters, approximately 6 million, or 43 percent, voted for Fujimori. Another 5 million either cast ballots for Toledo or marred their ballots and 3 million failed to turn up at the polls.

Toledo's opposition, meanwhile, has attracted the support of the discredited leaderships of the Peruvian workers movement. The Broad Front, or Frente Amplio, dominated by the Stalinist Peruvian Communist Party and the Maoist Patria Roja (Red Fatherland), threw its support behind the opposition candidate, arguing that the election expressed the struggle between “democracy and dictatorship.”

The CP-led General Confederation of Peruvian Workers provided the main forces for mass demonstrations that erupted against the electoral fraud, while Broad Front has called a series of protest marches that are to culminate in a mass demonstration against Fujimori's inauguration July 28.

After a decade of repression, the Peruvian workers movement has begun to show signs of renewed militancy. As it does so, the Stalinist leaders of the CP and the unions are resurrecting the same policies of electoral and parliamentary blocs that demoralized a previous generation and allowed Fujimori to come to power in the guise of an opponent of a corrupt and bankrupt system.

There may be additional reasons for US disenchantment with Fujimori. The luster has worn off the Peruvian president's sterling performance in imposing free market policies in the 1990s. Income from privatization fell to a mere $300 million last year, from a peak of $2.6 billion in 1994.

Moreover, Fujimori has reneged on promises to privatize a new group of state enterprises, both out of consideration for popular opposition to anticipated rate hikes and the interests of domestic cronies. Thus, Lima's water company, Sedapal, and the country's largest electricity generating plant, Mantaro, have been taken off the auction block. Meanwhile, US telecommunications giants such as BellSouth Corp. and FirstCom Corp., seeking to corner the Peruvian market, have complained bitterly that the government has done little to curb vestiges of monopolistic practices by the former state-owned company, Telefonica del Peru.

Finally, one cannot rule out that there are officials in the Clinton administration and the State Department who are committed to human rights monitoring and the promotion of formal democracy in Latin America, who see Fujimori as anathema.

But these policies stand in glaring contradiction to the economic measures demanded by the US banks and multinationals and also promoted by the State Department. Structural adjustment programs plunge large majorities of the population into poverty and create ever mounting social polarization. The official unemployment rate in Peru stands at 10 percent, while most analysts put it much higher. A recent United Nations report described nearly half the population as living in “absolute poverty.” The buying power of real wages has been eroded to such a degree that many government employees are paid extra salary “under the table,” just so they can make ends meet. This off-the-books approach has the advantage that the additional wages can be quickly eradicated should it prove necessary.

Maintaining a social order that creates such conditions inevitably demands repression and brutality. In a real sense, the Fujimori regime is the most finished expression of methods of rule that have emerged throughout Latin America in the wake of the formal transfer of power from military dictatorships to civilian presidencies over the past two decades. With poverty and inequality steadily deepening, the democratic pretensions of the region's civilian regimes have remained hollow. For masses of impoverished workers and peasants not only in Peru, but throughout the continent, police-state repression continues.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recently declared that “the Latin American democracies are in danger.” US concern is that social polarization in the region is creating conditions for social upheavals that will spin out of control. In recent months, land occupations in Brazil, mass protests leading to a state of emergency in Bolivia as well as the street demonstrations against Fujimori in Peru have all provided Washington with serious warnings. Latin America's corrupt and repressive governments may not be up to the task of containing the resistance of the oppressed.

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