

Peruvian dictator resigns: the fall of Fujimori

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Caught in an ever-tightening noose of political crises and scandals, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori resigned suddenly and by long distance, sending a letter November 20 to the Peruvian Congress from a hotel in Tokyo.

After more than a decade in which he has stood at the head of one of Latin America's most brutal police states, Fujimori apparently feared popular retribution as well as machinations within his own regime, in the event he returned to Peru to resign.

Most Peruvian analysts predicted that he would not come back, while there were reports that he had already shipped numerous crates of personal belongings out of the country. Reports of Fujimori's resignation provoked bitter recriminations from his cabinet and his closest political supporters, who appeared shocked that the president chose to make his announcement from abroad, leaving them, in effect, holding the bag. "He's abandoned us," exclaimed Prime Minister Federico Salas.

It was widely speculated that Fujimori would seek political asylum in Japan. His estranged wife has asserted that the Peruvian president was born there and has maintained dual nationality. His son and other relatives live there as well.

Thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of Lima following the announcement, waving flags and chanting "It's fallen, the dictatorship has fallen."

Faced with mounting pressure, particularly from Washington, over fraudulent elections staged in April and May, Fujimori had already agreed to step down next year, calling new elections and renouncing his attempt to claim an unprecedented, and formerly unconstitutional, third term as Peru's president. At the same time, however, he held out the prospect that he would continue to participate as a major actor in Peruvian politics, perhaps as leader of the congress and even returning to power as president within four years.

Fujimori's fate, however, became inextricably linked with that of his closest adviser, Vladimir Montesinos, the secret police chief who many described as the power behind the throne within the Peruvian dictatorship.

Protests unleashed by the release of a videotape showing Montesinos bribing an opposition Congressman to back Fujimori's regime led to the decision to call new elections.

Long suppressed accusations and revelations concerning the ex-army captain turned spy chief, however, continued surfacing, implicating him in massive corruption as well as bloody repression.

The bribery videotape has been followed by the release of another tape showing Montesinos addressing the commanders of the Peruvian armed forces at a dinner party held in the secret police headquarters. In it, he praised the military brass as "the basic pillar" of Fujimori's victory.

Having been cashiered from the Peruvian military and briefly imprisoned in the 1970s on charges of "treason" for having made a clandestine trip to Washington, where he contacted the CIA, Montesinos became a lawyer who specialized in defending drug traffickers. Lending his support to Fujimori during Fujimori's first presidential election campaign in 1990, Montesinos gained increasing power within the regime, eliminating rivals within the military command and becoming the most feared figure in Peru.

Meanwhile, his ties with the US spy agency remained intimate, and he was viewed in Washington as a key figure in the so-called war on drugs.

The bribery videotape was followed by confirmation that Montesinos was at the center of an international arms deal that funneled automatic weapons from Jordan through the Peruvian military to the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the main target of the escalating US military intervention in that country. Also confirmed was the existence of foreign bank accounts in Switzerland, Panama and elsewhere in which the secret police chief had deposited tens of millions of dollars.

Montesinos was compelled to flee the country in September after Fujimori formally disbanded the hated SIN, or National Intelligence Service, that he headed. He went to Panama, long a haven for US-backed dictators and agents whose usefulness to Washington had come to an end. It has since emerged that Montesinos had conspired with the commanders of the Peruvian military to stage a military coup last spring in between the two rounds of presidential elections. While the army reportedly backed the plan, the air force, navy and police commanders were ambivalent.

In October Montesinos returned to Peru, apparently fleeing threatened prosecution by the Panamanian government for his connections with drug traffickers from that country, as well as possible retribution from his former business partners in the narcotics trade.

Flying to a military airport in Peru, he continued to enjoy the backing of the army command. Fujimori responded by personally leading a manhunt for his ex-secret police chief, a clownish spectacle in which he ordered police and troops to search neighborhoods while Montesinos remained safely under the protection of the police and military themselves. Even as Fujimori sent his resignation letter, his former top aide, who is formally charged with laundering drug money, providing protection to drug traffickers, torture, murder and other crimes, had yet to be found.

Meanwhile, Fujimori saw his political position within Peru grow increasingly untenable as he lost control of the Congress, with its leadership falling into the hands of an opposition coalition led by Peru's traditional conservative bourgeois party, known as Popular Action. Congressional leaders had called for a vote declaring Fujimori unfit to lead and moving up the planned presidential elections.

At the same time, the corruption investigations against Montesinos increasingly implicated the president himself. A special prosecutor appointed to oversee the Montesinos case demanded that the Peruvian state prosecutors launch an investigation into Fujimori's own links to the drug trade. He cited the testimony of Roberto Escobar, the brother of slain Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, that the Medellin cocaine cartel contributed \$1 million to Fujimori's first presidential campaign in 1990.

Following the Escobar revelation, Peruvian newspapers recalled the meteoric rise of the Fujimori campaign a decade ago. Between the first round of the election and a runoff in which he faced the author Mario Vargas Llosa, who was the candidate of the traditional conservative parties, Fujimori's campaign suddenly came into substantial resources, including a private jet which he used to criss-cross the country. At the time, observers assumed that a substantial section of Peruvian big business had decided to bankroll the political neophyte.

An imprisoned Peruvian drug trafficker, meanwhile, has described Montesinos as the principal protector of drug trafficking in Peru, who received \$700 for every kilo that left the country. Those who failed to pay, however, were pursued ruthlessly.

Also possibly influencing Fujimori's decision to remain abroad was the release of an official report attributing more than 4,000 "disappearances" of workers, peasants and students to the Peruvian military. The report concluded with the call for the abrogation of the blanket amnesty that has

guaranteed the security forces immunity from prosecution for massacres, murders and torture carried out in the counterinsurgency campaigns against the Shining Path and Tupac Amaru guerrilla movements.

The character of the regime that will succeed Fujimori is by no means clear. His second vice president (the first vice president had already resigned), Ricardo Marquez, announced that he was prepared to form a government, while at the same time pleading with Fujimori to come back to Peru.

Opposition figures, including Fujimori's rival candidate in the last election, Alejandro Toledo, have insisted that Marquez owes his office to the same fraudulent vote won by Fujimori and cannot form a legitimate government. Instead, they have called for the leader of the Congress to form an interim regime and move up the presidential election.

Meanwhile, the Peruvian armed forces chiefs declared their commitment to "absolute respect of the decisions adopted by the constitutionally elected authorities." Given Peru's recent history of police state rule, combined with the profound political instability and social polarization gripping the country, such promises may prove short-lived.

While Washington had hoped to engineer an orderly transfer of power from the Fujimori regime, which had long served as a key base for US-backed intervention throughout the hemisphere, the Peruvian president's sudden resignation has opened up a political crisis that could rapidly spin out of control.

See Also:

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[21 September 2000]



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