Peru's President Garcia faces nationwide protests

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20 July 2007

Three weeks shy of his first anniversary in power, Peruvian President, Alan Garcia is facing nationwide mass protests against his political and economic program. Culminating in a two-day protest on July 11-12, millions of Peruvians including industrials workers, miners, coca growers, high school teachers, students and small merchants went on strike, organized marches, occupied public buildings and blockaded roads leading to all major cities.

There were several violent confrontations with the military and police with hundreds arrested, and at least three people killed. An indefinite strike by teachers, led by SUTEP (Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores en la Educacion del Peru), is playing a significant role in the struggle against the government.

The protesters are demanding that Garcia fulfill election promises to invest in infrastructure projects in the poor southern highlands and the eastern Amazon basin region, and reestablish labor rights taken away in the 1990s as part of the free market policies and wave of privatizations under the regime of Alberto Fujimori. The demonstrators have also demanded the rehiring of workers fired during the strike wave, a complete revision of the Free Trade Agreement already accepted by Peru and currently under discussion by the US Congress, and the convening of a Constituent Assembly.

Last year Garcia won the election in a second round vote. He defeated by a few percentage points his opponent, the ultra-nationalist and former member of the armed forces, Ollanta Humala.

To win, Garcia relied heavily on the stronghold of the APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) in the north. Above all, the backing of the upper and middle classes, as well as the more privileged sections of the working class in the capital, Lima, where more than 40 percent of the votes were concentrated.

The defeat of right-wing candidate Lourdes Flores from Unidad Nacional in the first round of the vote signaled a popular rejection of the free market policies implemented over 15 years by pro-US Presidents Alberto Fujimori and Alejandro Toledo.

In the second round, Flores' votes in Lima went to Garcia, not out of support for APRA's program but because of the greater fear of a Humala victory. Thus, from the start, Garcia lacked any real popular mandate or even majority support.

For most of his first year in power, Garcia enjoyed a substantial approval rating, thanks largely to his demagogic promises to distribute wealth to improve the living standards of all Peruvians. After 11 months, however, his rating dropped below 50 percent, for the first time, because the macro economic statistics that have attracted foreign investors have done nothing for the majority of Peruvians who live in poverty.

To quell the mass unrest, Garcia responded with an executive decree authorizing the armed forces to occupy strategic locations like power stations, ports and airports for the next 30 days. In a visit to the northern city of Trujillo, the President accused communist groups of organizing the protest and denounced the demonstrators as advocates of "an ideology buried by history."

Garcia also condemned the press for running headlines on the protests and mounting political scandals rather than focusing on his development policies. From Lima, Premier Jorge Del Castillo said the strike wave was not against the government party, but against democracy, and called for a "strong hand" against the protesters and unions supporting the strikes. He said this "extremist conduct" will scare away investors.

According to political analyst Eduardo Toche, the current situation is the result of the government not having "a strategic plan to visualize its long term objective," and that under these circumstances "the only short term measure to maintain control was the militarization of the country."

Such statements are a warning that APRA will rely on the "strong hand" of the armed forces to stage bloody repression. The history of Latin America is replete with instances in which governments have called upon the military to repress the people and curtail basic rights in the name of "defending democracy."

For most of the 20th century, APRA dominated Peruvian politics, appealing to the masses with its anti-imperialist rhetoric. It called itself the "party of the people" and adopted the *Marseilles* as its anthem.

Today, Garcia's government has abandoned all of the old anti-imperialist posturing and embraced an agenda oriented towards attracting foreign investors and fighting drug trafficking. Within his first month in power, Garcia repudiated his election promise of revising the Free Trade Agreement with Washington, and made its signing his first priority.

With the US suspicious of his intentions—in his first presidential term in the 1980s, Garcia nationalized the banks and stopped foreign debt payments, provoking Washington's ire—he formed a cabinet that included a right-wing Opus Dei member and named two prominent, pro-US businessmen, who enjoy the full support of Peruvian bankers and industrialists, to lead the effort to pass the Free Trade Agreement.

Parallel to his pro-US agenda, once in power Garcia announced the implementation of a series of economic measures to promote development in the regions he overwhelmingly lost to Humala. While political infighting among his supporters virtually eliminated Humala as a political force, today these regions are the center of anti-government unrest.

What is significant about the uprising in the southern and eastern regions is that they are being led by grass-roots organizations, representing the population.

* In **Apurimac** the marches were led by the Confederacion de Productores Agropecuarios de las Cuencas Cocaleras del Peru and had the support of many rank-and-file organizations representing all sectors of the population.

* Public transport, banks, businesses, schools and the main food market all remained closed. In the city of **Abancay**, a 12-year-old girl died after being hit by a stone during a confrontation between school teachers and the national police.

* In **Cusco**, the ancient capital of the Incas, over 10,000 people poured into the streets, and the Federacion Departamental de Trabajadores del

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Cusco is considering calling an indefinite strike.

* In **Puno**, nearly 5,000 people led by the teachers union SUTEP and the Communist Party-led Confederacion General de Trabajadores del Peru (CGTP) occupied the airport runway in **Juliaca**. The army intervened to clear the airport.

Protesters also blockaded the highways. Located barely 40 km from Lake Titicaca, Juliaca is a major transportation hub and vital for trade between Peru and Bolivia. Local and regional authorities, as well as public and private institutions backed the struggle in Puno.

* In the second largest Peruvian city, **Arequipa**, there was no public transportation, and marches from the poor neighborhoods culminated in the Plaza de Armas, the city's main square, with the participation of SUTEP, construction workers, students and teachers of Universidad Nacional de San Agustin.

In particular, the *arequipeños* were protesting against new taxes that increased the price of gasoline, and to demand the implementation of promised infrastructure projects like the Transoceanic Highway and the Majes Sihuas II irrigation project.

* In **Tacna**, the southernmost city and a trading post with Chile, the strike was backed by the region's president who described it as a genuine popular expression against "the exploitation in the mines and the neo-liberal policies of the government."

* Over 60,000 people demonstrated in the streets In **Pucalpa**, the most important commercial center in the Amazon Basin. It is located on the shores of the Ucayali river that turns into the Amazon river. The area provides Lima with food, vegetables, lumber and other forest products, and connects the country to Brazil via the Ucayali-Amazon Rivers.

A strike that began in early July against the government's elimination of tax exemptions, which are vital to the region's economy, shut down both business and transport there as well as in the city of Huanuco. Defense Fronts were organized, and 35 soup kitchens were created to aid the poorest neighborhoods.

* Other regions, which include the poorest in the country, Pasco, Junin, Ayacucho y Huancavelica also went of strike on July 11-12.

* In the north, the traditional stronghold of the ruling party, peaceful marches took place in **Trujillo**, APRA's birthplace, **Chiclayo**, a major commercial and agricultural center, and **Chimbote,** center of the fish-meal industry, a major export commodity.

* In **Lima**, as many as 20,000 people joined a march led by SUTEP and the CGTP. The demands raised by the unions included: approval of a new labor law, elimination of labor contractors, used by companies to avoid paying workers adequate wages and benefits, the taxing of the super-profits of the mine owners, who are benefiting from the sharp increase in world metal prices and revision of the Free Trade Agreement.

The police used tear gas to disperse the march. Hundreds were arrested, included the leadership of the teachers union. Left-wing politicians, including Ollanta Humala, joined the march. The CGTP general secretary, Mario Huaman, denounced the government for initiating the persecution of trade unionists.

Prior to the 48-hour strike there were two significant strikes: those of the miners of Casapalca and the SUTEP-led teachers.

Casapalca is a mine located about 100 kilometers from Lima at nearly four thousand meters above sea level. Miners struck for 40 days after the owners fired hundreds. Throughout the strike, the miners blocked the Carretera Central that links Lima with the interior.

There were many confrontations with the police. One mineworkers' leader was killed. Nineteen policemen and an unknown number of miners were injured.

The strike ended when the owners accepted the workers right to form a union. The company also agreed to a 1,000 soles (about US$314) bonus to the miners and the rehiring of 40 out of the 106 fired workers. The other 66 will be subject to an evaluation.

After the Casapalca strike, 46 unions representing the miners decided to join the strike on July 11-12. Mutual support has been one important characteristic of the present struggle, with miners supporting teachers, teachers supporting the regional struggle and cities supporting other cities.

Schoolteachers have been on strike since July 5 protesting against a new law attacking teachers' rights, including the right to strike. According to SUTEP, it will open the door to privatizing public education.

In spite of the government's attempts to bring in substitute teachers, the strike continues to this day. According to SUTEP, 80 percent of its members have observed the strike. Reports from many cities speak of continuous marches, confrontations with the police, blockading of roads and the occupation of public buildings. Though the strike is considered illegal, the authorities in at least two regions are contradicting the central government by declaring it to be legal.

The growth of social inequality resulting from nearly two decades of free market policies finds expression in Peru—as elsewhere in Latin America—in the proliferation of private education at all levels, especially in higher [university] education.

According to statistics released by a joint study of UNESCO/OECD Institute for Statistics, Peruvian teachers are among the worst paid in the world. The report says:

"In Thailand, an experienced primary school teacher at the top of the salary scale earns almost five times as much as an entry level colleague. In Brazil, Malaysia, Indonesia and Jordan, maximum salaries are between 2.3 and 3.4 times higher than starting salaries. In Peru, by contrast, salaries do not change over the course of a career for those with minimum training."

Other figures in the report show the precarious situation faced by schoolteachers in Peru. While in Argentina and Chile, primary school teachers annual salary start at $9,000 and reach over $14,000 after 15 years service, in Peru a teacher is paid a flat $4,200 regardless of seniority and experience.

These figures speak volumes about the social injustice prevailing in Peru and the roots of the current uprising against a government led by a party that has shed any pretense of representing the interests of the people in favor of satisfying the needs of foreign capital.

Given the magnitude of the protests, the government has been forced to make minimal concessions and send high-ranking officials to the most restive regions in an attempt to calm the population.

In Arequipa, where the regional strike continues to this day, Premier Jorge Del Castillo announced that the government would eliminate the tax on corn flour to avoid a bread price hike. He also announced a government subsidy to avoid a price increase on gasoline.

Likewise, the government promised to reinstitute the tax exemption in the region of Ucayali, where the city of Pucalpa is located.

One year ago, the media speculated on whether Garcia would become a counterweight to the nationalist-populist trend in Latin America led by Presidents Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

Today, Garcia is doing all he can to win Washington's favor. Facing mass opposition, he has gone out of his way to assure that the unrest will not affect the signing of the Free Trade Agreement and his relationship with the US.

His stance has earned him the support of other bourgeois leaders as well as official representatives of foreign capital.

The outgoing US Ambassador to Peru, James Curtis Strubble, said the national demonstrations "will not have a negative impact" on ratifying the treaty. Curtis hailed the improved commercial relations between the two countries, with Peru's exports increasing 144 percent and US exports by 72 percent.

Former right-wing presidential candidate, Lourdes Flores, from Unidad Nacional speaking as dean of USIL University and in the presence of the French Ambassador Pierre Charasse, said the government should "move

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forward with its agenda to avoid social upheavals."

The leader of the right-wing Accion Popular, Alberto Andrade, also came out in support of Garcia declaring, "The government is obliged to protect public buildings and guarantee social peace."

Garcia has expressed particular outrage over strikers blocking the train to Machu Picchu, a favorite of foreign tourists, calling it "a crime against Peru."

Machu Picchu, a legacy of the engineering skills of the Incas, with its breathtaking views, was included earlier this month in the Seven Wonders of the World.

Unfortunately, Machu Picchu has not escaped the transformations brought about by globalization, which have placed it out of reach for all but a small minority of Peruvians. Train tickets from Cusco to Machu Picchu are very expensive—round trips cost $80, $200 and $550 for the deluxe train carrying the name of the Yale lecturer who re-discovered Machu Picchu in 1911, Hiram Bingham. To spend one night in the exclusive, Orient-Express Sanctuary Lodge located at the top of the mountain, where the ruins are, costs between $715 and $1,165 a night. True, there are many accommodations at the foot of the mountain—though some there can cost $650 a night—but the sunset and sunrise on Machu Picchu are the exclusive property of the super rich.

This is not a small point. For Garcia and the Peruvian ruling class, Machu Picchu helps sell Peru to international capital.

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