

Peruvian President Garcia swears in new cabinet to “restore order”

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A series of events in Peruvian politics strongly indicates that President Alan Garcia and his party APRA are quickly moving toward a confrontation with the working class in the wake of the nationwide protest movement triggered by the recent massacre of indigenous people in the Amazon basin.

On July 10, Garcia swore in six new ministers. As prime minister, Javier Velasquez replaced Yehude Simon, who fell into disgrace following the June 5 massacre in Bagua, where dozens of native protesters were killed or “disappeared.”

The new cabinet was sworn in days after a massive nationwide protest against Garcia’s economic model on July 7, 8 and 9.

As president of the Congress, Javier Velasquez was known as a hard-line defender of the ruling APRA party, who ruled the body with an iron hand, at one point expelling seven opposition congressmen for 120 days. Velasquez’s first words after assuming his new post were: “The priority of this cabinet will be to restore order.”

Martin Perez was sworn in as minister of foreign trade, a key position given Garcia’s program of opening up Peru’s natural resources to foreign capital.

Perez was the president of the congressional commission responsible for monitoring the international financial crisis. He maintains close relations with powerful mining sectors and the Romero group, the most powerful banking group in the country. The banking and mining sector stand to profit handsomely from the recently implemented Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States.

In presenting his new cabinet, Garcia said, “The first cabinet was about maintaining economic growth and austerity, the second to fight against corruption and poverty and the third to establish social order.”

Again, Garcia lies shamelessly. It is common knowledge among Peruvians that the source of mass unrest is social inequality—with a narrow financial elite sharing with foreign capital the vast bulk of the country’s wealth—and the appalling poverty in which the majority of Peruvians live.

In an almost delusional speech, Garcia had said, “Peru is the target of a great international conspiracy to overthrow my government and this explains the growing social unrest in the country.”

According to well-known historian and anthropologist Carlos Monge, Garcia went so far as to “call all his ambassadors, a measure never taken before, to line them up behind his speech.” Monge added that the confrontational tone of the speech closes the door to further dialog and “is leading the country down the road of polarization and authoritarianism.”

Days after the Amazon massacre, Garcia closed down the radio station *La Voz* in Bagua. Next, Garcia tried to shut down *La Primera*, a newspaper that has been reporting favorably on the mass movement against Garcia’s economic plan.

There are real reasons for concern about the antagonistic rhetoric employed by the president in his speech.

Garcia’s government has lost effective control over almost the entire Andes and Amazon basin territories. Events are occurring at an impressive pace, and the political momentum keeps moving against him, with the large majority of Peruvians disapproving his handling of the crisis.

Garcia won the election in 2006 with the support of the bourgeoisie and the most conservative layers of the middle class in Lima, the capital. His rival, the ultra-nationalist former army officer Ollanta Humala, won overwhelmingly in the Andes and Amazon basin.

There are indications that Garcia now is losing the support of the middle class layers that previously saw him as the lesser of two evils. These included the supporters of the candidate of the traditional right wing, Lourdes Flores, who voted for Garcia in the second round in 2006 because they were terrified by the incendiary nationalist rhetoric employed by Ollanta Humala during the election campaign.

Recent polls show that 73.9 percent of the urban population disapproves of Garcia’s administration and 64 percent of all Peruvians blame the government for the events in Bagua. Those with a favorable view of Garcia himself dropped from 29.2 percent to 21.2 percent. In addition, 82 percent disagree with the way he handled the conflict [in Bagua] and 81 percent agree with the indigenous people.

According to historian Monge, the right is beginning to distance itself from Garcia. He put forward the right’s political interpretation of the recent events, offering itself as an alternative for saving the ruling class from the growing mass movement that has Garcia on the ropes.

“The main problem is that people are unhappy because the state is not functioning,” Monge said. “They think the best way to save the neo-liberal model is to reform the state and make it smaller. From this perspective, the right sees APRA as part of the problem and not the solution.”

What the right plans to do to save the neo-liberal model he did not spell out. The course of events shows that Garcia is running out of options. Furthermore, behind his confrontational speech are elements advocating dictatorial measures.

Garcia’s problem is that he is governing the country for the benefit of foreign capital and a small minority in the ruling class that will benefit from the FTA. According to Monge, concessions to oil and mining companies occupied 15 percent of the Amazon basin territory in 2004. Today these stand at 82 percent.

This “reveals,” Monge said, “that someone is getting in your house and, finally, the avalanche of decrees passed by the government, under the pretext of the FTA with the US, are part of the agenda of big capital.”

Former Prime Minister Yehude Simon was imprisoned during the dictatorial regime of Alberto Fujimori for allegedly having connections with left-wing guerrilla organizations. One year ago, Garcia called Simon to form a government in an attempt to appease growing popular unrest against his right-wing economic plan.

At the time, the mass movement against the government was being led by the miners—one of the strongest sections of the Peruvian working class with a long history of uncompromising struggle. Garcia saw in Simon the man who could negotiate with the working class and peasant organizations.

Thus, Simon’s resignation signals that the road of compromise has ended.

Meanwhile, Ronald Gamarra, executive secretary for the National Coordinator for Human Rights, complained that one month after the massacre in Bagua the government has failed to convene a formal investigation including international figures, government officials and representatives of the indigenous people.

Several organizations are contesting the official government figures placing the massacre’s death toll at 34.

According to *La Primera*, there are at least 16 more missing since the massacre. Meanwhile, the legal counsel for the Peruvian Association for Human Rights (Aprodeh), Juan Jose Quispe, said his organization was still trying to find the whereabouts of native people on a list of 61 missing.

More information has come out indicating that the Bagua massacre was a deliberate provocation taken after the natives had announced their intention to lift their roadblock. This version has been corroborated by both native leaders and police personnel.

The Bagua massacre proved to be too much for Prime Minister Simon. Knowing his days were numbered, Simon traveled to the areas of conflict to attend to the claims of the

population. His efforts, however, proved futile.

Garcia is known for refusing to accept anyone making decisions without his authorization. Thus, when Simon agreed to nullify the Amazon decrees, Garcia used him as a scapegoat for the growing crisis.

Since the successful national day of protest against the massacre on June 11, Peru has lived through one convulsive event after another, with the epicenter of the unrest moving from the northern territory and the jungle to the highly populated Andean region in the south.

Canchi native demonstrators blockaded the Inca imperial city of Cuzco, threatening the most important Inca religious event, the *Inti Raymi*, held three days after the winter solstice. The *Inti Raymi* is an important tourist attraction, and this must have angered the president.

The three days of national protest on July 7, 8 and 9 called by the *Frente Nacional por la Vida y la Soberania* (National Front for Life and Sovereignty) were most successful in the south, where most of the struggle had centered over the past month.

In Puno, the roads were taken over by the population, shutting down commerce and transport for all three days of protest.

In Juliaca, 10,000 miners of Rinconada came out to speak with government officials. Among their demands are for the paving of roads, electricity for Rinconada and a health center for 30,000 people.

A 72-hour strike closed down Ayacucho. In Huancavelica, residents, merchants, drivers, teachers and public servants went on strike for three days. They are asking for a better distribution of the revenues of the Mantaro hydroelectric plant and improvement of the Huancavelica-Angaraes and Imperial-Pampas roads.

A march was held in Lima on the second day. Thousands of trade unionists, mainly taxi drivers, construction workers, textile workers and teachers, were joined by students and parties from the left in a march across downtown Lima to protest Garcia’s economic model. The main organizer was the country’s principal trade union confederation, the CGTP.



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