

Aymara protesters seize Peruvian city of Puno

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A week before Peruvians go to the polls on Sunday to elect a new president, nearly 20,000 members of the Aymara native ethnic group occupied the city of Puno—population 100,000—in protest over the contemptuous refusal of the government of President Alan García to meet their demands to halt the opening up of their lands to the mining and petroleum industries.

In Peru, there have been many cases in which mining development has severely damaged agriculture and cattle raising, the Aymaras' main sources of income. The pollution of rivers and land in areas close to mining operations has been amply documented.

The Aymara people started an indefinite strike in mid-May, responding to a call issued by the Committee for the Defense of Natural Resource of the Southern Zone (Comité de Lucha del Frente de Defensa de los Recursos Naturales de la Zona Sur), the organization that has taken the lead in the Aymara mobilization.

On May 24, infuriated by President García's decision to allow Bear Creek mining company to go ahead with its mining project in Santa Ana, thousands of Aymaras took buses to the city of Puno, located on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

They proceeded to occupy the road linking Puno to the border city of Desaguadero, paralyzing trade between Peru and Bolivia. They also occupied access roads to the commercial city of Juliaca—the largest in the region with a population 250,000. These roads connect Puno and Bolivia with Cusco to the north and provide access to Pacific Ocean ports to the west, where produce from Bolivia and the Peruvian southern region are exported overseas. The Juliaca airport, the only one in the region, was also occupied by demonstrators.

The Lima daily, *La República*, reported that “students of the National University of the Altiplano—UNA—left

the classrooms to join the indefinite strike.... Students from the Andean University Néstor Cáceres Velásquez also joined the strike and occupied the university grounds...furthermore, classes were suspended at various educational institutions to safeguard the students.”

The violence increased on the 18th day of the strike, when the High Level Commission sent by the central government in Lima left Puno without resolving any of the protest's demands, only making vague promises to “study the mining concessions that affect regional development, over a 180-day period.” The commission members “spoke for a couple of hours and returned to Lima,” reported *La República*.

With his characteristic pedantry and arrogance, President García declared, “For a department to ask to be exempt from mining is a constitutional absurdity.”

“If you interview any of them at random,” the president said of the protesters, “he would not know why he is there. This kind of mobilization taking people who are not aware of things, for electoral purposes, it seems to me is a form of manipulation and almost racial contempt against those people,” he said.

García concluded by threatening that “the National Police will not allow the infringement of public and private property in the region.”

Feeling cheated once again by the authorities of the central government, the Aymaras proceeded to take over several government buildings, among them the headquarters of SUNAT (tax collection agency), taking public documents to the streets and setting them on fire. Heavily out-numbered, the 2,000 police in the zone did not attempt to confront the demonstrators, in spite of García's order calling for repression.

Next, the demonstrators took over the port of Puno on Lake Titicaca, and the people of the Uros Islands proclaimed their support, together with the boaters providing tourist service on the lake. Urban transport

was blocked, and bus terminals closed down.

The main Lima daily, *El Comercio*, reported: “A group of demonstrators opposed to mining in the region burned the customs office and sacked the warehouse and its installations.... The inflamed strikers put gas tanks at the public buildings’ doors and made them explode, provoking the burning of vehicles in the surrounding area.”

Lima’s newspapers and television stations concentrated their coverage on the acts of violence and vandalism that terrified the political class. They claimed that partisans of presidential candidate Ollanta Humala, who is expected to capture up to 80 percent of the votes in Puno, were instigating the Aymara uprising for political aims.

Large sections of the Peruvian bourgeoisie—in banking, industry and mining—who have enriched themselves from the free market economic model, support Humala’s rival Keiko Fujimori from Fuerza 2001. She is the daughter of former president Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year prison sentence for his role in death squad murders and kidnappings in the early 1990s.

Humala, a former army officer, is the candidate of Gana Peru. He narrowly lost the last election in 2006 in which he identified himself with the nationalist policies of Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez. Humala has moderated his tone in the current contest, identifying himself with the pro-market policies of Brazil’s former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and hiring two of Lula’s ex-political aides as his campaign advisers.

In the course of the week leading up to the presidential elections, the government retreated and suspended the decree giving exploration and exploitation concessions to mining and oil companies. The Aymara organizations have stopped their protests, but made it clear that they would resume if their demands are not met.



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