

Municipal elections a debacle for Peruvian ‘left’

Armando Cruz
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Peru’s pseudo-left parties suffered overwhelming defeat in municipal elections earlier this month.

The right-wing candidate Luis Castañeda, a former two-term mayor of Lima, swept back into office in the Peruvian capital in the October 5 elections to choose mayors and regional presidents across the country.

The big loser of the contest was the outgoing mayor of Lima, Susana Villarán, the most visible figure of the “left” parties, who received only 10 percent of the vote. The office of mayor of Lima is considered the second most powerful in the country.

Villarán, a relatively new figure and a product of the 1960s middle class radicalization, was catapulted to the city hall in 2010 in a vote that gave distorted expression to the popular rejection of the traditional parties.

During the last four years, however, Villarán jettisoned her reformist image and promoted big business interests in the city, including those of the gigantic Brazilian transnationals Odebrecht and OAS, which sent support and personnel from Brazil’s ruling Workers Party (PT) to act as “advisors” to Villarán’s campaign.

In a contest between 13 candidates for mayor of Lima, Castañeda got an unprecedented and overwhelming 50 percent of the vote, and his party Solidaridad Nacional (SN) won the mayoralty of many districts in the capital and a good number of council seats in Lima’s city hall. Outside of Lima, SN failed to register any significant victories.

Castañeda won despite new revelations during the campaign concerning the “Comunicore” money-laundering and embezzlement scandal, in which he is one of the main suspects.

Most of his voters came from the poorest districts of Lima, the slums known as “pueblos jóvenes” or “young towns,” where during his last term Castañeda

launched a series of public works projects such as stairs on hills, parks and hospitals. For this he acquired the nickname of the mayor who “steals, but gets things done.”

The vote for the so-called “national parties” (APRA, Partido Popular Cristiano, Acción Popular and the *fujimoristas* of Fuerza Popular) were also very low.

The Peruvian media has responded to the elections with talk of a general collapse of support for the established parties and a surge—or solidification—of backing for so-called regional movements throughout the country. These are improvised movements without a long-term perspective that try to assert regionalism and are centered—in not a few cases—on a regional strongman or a local proposal.

In many provinces, analysts pointed to the increased power of the so-called “alternate powers.” Mafia-like cartels of illegal business—drug dealing, illegal mining, illegal logging, among others—that thrive in their respective zones and use candidates like puppets to ensure that their businesses flourish under their administrations.

After the elections, 129 violent confrontations were registered throughout the country between mobs supporting one or another party or candidate over allegations of corruption or electoral fraud. These clashes left at least three people dead. The surge in this kind of violence is likely tied to the increased influence in politics of these criminal organizations.

It is noteworthy that in the run-up to the elections, dozens of candidates had been accused of involvement in criminal activities ranging from corruption to terrorism and even rape.

A significant case is that of Gregorio Santos, who was reelected president of the northern region of Cajamarca. Santos, who was the main sponsor of the

mass mobilizations against environmental threats posed by the Peruvian-American Conga mining project, has been in jail for months awaiting trial over corruption allegations. Despite his own admission of guilt, his victory was lauded by the pseudo-left as a “triumph” for the people of Cajamarca and part of the struggle in defense of the environment.

None of the main candidates made any serious proposals to improve the conditions of the masses of people or eradicate the urgent problems in Peruvian society—something remarkable given the huge sums spent on every type of propaganda on a national level.

Permanent mass poverty, lack of basic services for millions of people, the continuing destruction of workers’ rights, corruption, the jeopardizing of the environment and the possible privatization of water and public health care gave way to the issues of insecurity and the fight against crime, which were presented by most candidates as the main problems facing the nation.

This is in line with the media’s semi-hysterical portrayal of Peru as a nation threatened by high rates of criminality and violence, ignoring the real urgent problems in society—poverty and inequality—and demanding that law-and-order measures be applied. The crime rate in Peru is, in fact, far lower than in other nations of the region, such as Venezuela and Colombia.

In recent years, Peru’s economic growth rate has been one of the highest in the region. This hasn’t translated, however, into any substantial improvement in the conditions of life for the majority of the population.

The monthly minimum wage is S/0.750 or \$283—one of the lowest in the region. Eight out of 10 workers have no benefits, vacations, or compensation for dismissal and are part of what is known as the “informal economy” of middle and small businesses. Since 1991, workers’ incomes have been reduced to half of Peru’s GDP.

In Lima, millions of residents of the *pueblos jóvenes* slums located in the city’s periphery reside in houses made of wood, adobe and reed mats (*estera*) and are forced to buy water at a higher price than in the urban zones. The national government of President Ollanta Humala has proposed to partially privatize water, which would lead to even higher prices.

Villarán and the rest of the candidates are accomplices in the perpetuation of these conditions,

and their election would have only have meant a continuation of the same policies that created them.

The right-wing populist Castañeda was able to fill the void left by the collapse in support for Villarán—who unsuccessfully tried to present herself as the candidate of “honesty” in contrast to the corrupt Castañeda. The real source of the Peruvian “left’s” debacle, however, is to be found in social transformations that go far beyond Villarán’s individual failings.

The national reformist programs that these political and union organizations advanced in an earlier period have been rendered impotent under conditions in which Peru’s economy has been thoroughly integrated into and subordinated to global capitalism, which dominates the country through international mining concerns and the financial markets. At the same time, a substantial middle class layer that once identified itself as “left” has seen its own income rise through this process, even as the exploitation and oppression of the working class and rural masses has only deepened.

Villarán and the so-called Left Broad Front—which groups together most of the “left” parties in Peru—are only able to make vague calls for reform without proposing any fight or mobilization to achieve them, while in practice they align themselves with and serve powerful business and financial sectors, subordinating the interests of the masses of working people to capitalist profit.

The Peruvian working class can find no way forward outside of forging its political independence based on a socialist and internationalist program for the revolutionary transformation of society.



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