Peru’s electoral board bars two presidential candidates before first round of elections

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One month before the first round of Peru’s elections, the National Jury of Elections (Jurado Nacional de Elecciones, JNE) has barred two presidential candidates: Julio Guzmán (Todos Por el Perú, TPP) and César Acuña (Alianza Para el Progreso, APP) for two different election infractions. The ruling has provoked popular anger since far more powerful presidential candidates have clearly committed the same violations and worse.

Both Guzmán and Acuña were new candidates who at different times had climbed to second in the national polls, leading to speculation that in the second round of elections, either one of them could have defeated former congresswoman Keiko Fujimori (Fuerza Popular), who for more than a year has been leading the polls with 30 percent.

Fujimori is the daughter of former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) who imposed Washington-backed free-market reforms and wholesale privatizations. His authoritarian regime collapsed when evidence surfaced of massive corruption, forcing him to abandon the country. He was sentenced in 2009 to decades in prison for corruption and human rights abuses such as ordering extra-judicial killings of political opponents, including trade unionists.

Her campaign has been focused on promoting the populist and limited social assistance programs of her father’s government along with a hard line against crime, gaining support among the lowest-income population from both urban and rural areas. She is, as well, the favored candidate of Peruvian big business and a “trusted asset” of

Washington due to her father’s bowing to imperialism.

As with most countries in the region, Peru benefited from the China-driven “commodities boom” and the flow of foreign investments to “emerging markets” during the past decade. But unlike some of its neighbors—Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador—there was never a “turn to the left” in the Andean country.

The governments that followed the imposition of the neoliberal model in the 1990s relentlessly continued and deepened these same policies. They likewise maintained the Peruvian government’s subservience to both Washington and the foreign investors that exploit without restrictions the country’s natural resources, fueling the misery and impoverishment of the masses. Today, the country has 70 percent of employment in the so-called “informal sector,” with two out of three jobs being temporary.

The political result has been the thorough-going alienation of the population from the political establishment as a whole and the delegitimization of all parties and politicians who had a post in power over the last decade and a half.

Former president Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006), under fire from a year-long fraud investigation in connection with the purchase of a mansion, has an average approval rating of 2 percent.

Two-time president Alan Garcia has also been hurt by his involvement in a drug-related bribery scandal during his last government. The candidate of APRA (an erstwhile social democratic mass party that has become a right-wing organization headed by powerful and corrupt lobbyists), Garcia made an electoral alliance with the far-right Popular Christian Party (Partido Popular Cristiano, PPC). He picked as his running mate longtime PPC presidential candidate Lourdes Flores in an attempt at merging two “established” and “institutional” parties. The result could not have been worse: Garcia has remained in last place, trailing previously unknown candidates with no significant support from the corporate media and big business.

The Nationalist Party of current President Ollanta Humala withdrew its candidate Daniel Urresti (former Interior Minister and a former army officer accused of

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murdering a journalist during the internal conflict of the 1980s) after it was clear it would not poll more than 2 percent of the vote. Under Peruvian law, a political party loses its official recognition if it wins less than 5 percent in an election.

Humala himself has an 80 percent disapproval rating, after spending his entire mandate repudiating his election promises to reverse neoliberal measures and recover control of natural resources from the hands of foreign interests.

"It's clear that the polls show that, in this election, the population is desperately seeking new faces," writes political analyst Erick Sablich. "The novelty was first reflected in Acuña and later by Guzmán."

Acuña is a former congressman and businessman who made millions with his chain of private universities. He gained political notoriety by becoming the city mayor of Trujillo and later governor of the surrounding region, La Libertad; taking away the historic stronghold of the APRA party. He based his appeal to the population on stressing his motivational "rags-to-riches" story of growing up in poverty amidst 12 siblings and achieving success against the odds. His candidacy gained strength (and provoked concern in ruling circles) after he declared he would give "wholesale money" to the people if he was elected.

The JNE decided to remove him from the electoral process after it was proved that he had given thousands of soles in donations to some selected people during his tours across the country, violating legal limits on such donations.

Guzmán was deputy minister of Industries in the current government and is a former officer of the Inter-American Development Bank. His campaign gained support after he began to attack the long political domination of "dinosaur" politicians, posturing as someone from outside of traditional politics. In little more than a month he rose from 5 percent to 18 percent in the polls. While his initial constituency was middle- and upper-class youth, his support began to grow in the working class and among less oppressed layers opposed to Fujimori when it was seen as feasible that he could defeat her.

Notwithstanding his attacks on worn-out politicians and parties that have dominated the state machinery over the last decades, Guzmán's political outlook proceeds from the same right-wing outlook. Therefore, he represented merely an attempt by sections of the ruling class to lend a new face to its program of maintaining the hated socioeconomic model that has assured them unchallenged domination of the country.

The JNE ruling that aborted his candidacy was highly controversial due to the charges being of an apparently minor, bureaucratic, character. According to the JNE, Guzmán's party could not participate because its electoral committee failed to comply with electoral procedures. Guzmán sought to fight this with various judicial appeals, but it was all in vain. Since then, he has pointed fingers at Fujimori and Garcia, accusing them of influencing the JNE in order to eliminate a potential new rival. He has declared that if the JNE does not treat them with the same criteria applied to his own candidacy, "the current election and potential elected authorities will be illegitimate."

Since then, political reports have established that some of the ruling members of the JNE have connections with the parties of Fujimori and Garcia. More outrageous is the fact that Fujimori and her party has been giving donations in money and lavish gifts (such as home appliances) at rallies all over the country since the beginning of the election campaign, yet the JNE failed to take any action and just recently began investigating these infractions due to popular pressure.

Large demonstrations have been held opposing the return of *fujimorismo* to Peru. Nationwide protests are being prepared for April 5, the date of the infamous *autogolpe* (self-coup) of Fujimori's father in 1992, when he closed down the Congress with the help of the army in order to establish authoritarian rule.

Whichever candidate wins the next election, the government will have to face growing opposition to its capitalist agenda. The slow privatization of the public water services, the imposition of the anti-China, US-led Trans Pacific Partnership, and a current oil spill in the Amazon river region are provoking a strong response among the youth and impoverished layers with which the next government will have a showdown, sooner rather than later.

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