

Deadly political violence in Peru as Kuczynski completes first 100 days

A reporter

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Two people were killed last week in armed clashes that broke out in the small town of Curimanai in Peru's eastern state of Ucayali.

The bloody battle erupted between rival factions supporting the town's former mayor, Loiber Rocha, and his interim replacement, Delsy Vera.

Rocha had been removed from office after being re-elected to a third term as mayor in 2014 and spent at least six months as a fugitive before a local court cancelled a warrant seeking his arrest on corruption charges. After the court ruling, Peru's election board restored him to his post as mayor.

According to local police, a crowd over 100 people, some armed with guns, gathered outside the municipal building to prevent Rocha from returning to office, clashing with police and the long-time mayor's supporters.

The two killed in the ensuing clash both died from gunshot wounds. Another 16 civilians were reported injured, along with 17 policemen brought in to quell the violence.

Mayor Rocha was charged with negotiating an inflated contract to pay \$600,000 for road-building machinery for road improvements that never materialized.

The local government receives some \$1.4 million annually from the US-based company Duke Energy in the form of taxes on a local natural gas well and processing plant. Nonetheless, half of the area's children suffer from chronic malnutrition and the town lacks both running water and sewage facilities.

This incident in a remote corner of Peru took place as recently elected President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski marked his first 100 days in office last week. It is emblematic of the crisis and corruption, as well as social inequality and dependence upon foreign capital,

confronting the country as a whole.

Kuczynski, popularly known as PPK, is a former World Bank and International Monetary Fund official who went on to found a private equity firm, making a fortune off of Latin American privatizations and rapacious corporate restructuring deals.

Wall Street regards PPK, who gained American citizenship, as one of its own. The Wall Street ratings agency Moody's Investors Services issued a report this week predicting a renewed expansion in private sector investment and a "better operating environment" for corporate and finance capital, after a contraction in private investment in Peru by 4 percent in 2016.

To further this image of a "better operating environment" for foreign capital, Kuczynski has adopted the guise of a champion of an anti-corruption drive and a crackdown on crime.

Yet, within his first 100 days in office, his administration has been hit with its own series of corruption scandals, which are representative of a longstanding political system in which kickbacks and bribery are commonplace.

On October 2, PPK's presidential health advisor, Carlos Moreno, was forced to resign after a tape emerged in which he offered to funnel patients from the General Health System (Sistema Integral de Salud--SIS) to clinics run by the Archdiocese of Lima in return for a kickback. Moreno is heard in the recording describing the scheme as a "gold mine" and telling administrators, "You don't know how much money we are going to make."

It was not the first time that Moreno, the most politically connected doctor in the country, had been charged with corruption. He had worked in previous administration, including that of Kuczynski's immediate predecessor, Ollanta Humala, and that of the

dictatorial Alberto Fujimori. In addition to his public post, he was personal physician to not only Kuczynski, but also Lourdes Nano, former leader and presidential candidate of the right-wing Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC), former President Alan Garcia and various other legislators and party leaders.

Moreno faces seven corruption charges and could face a jail sentence of up to 15 years.

Following on the heels of the Moreno scandal, it was announced at the end of last month that Deputy Agriculture Minister Juan Carlos Gonzales was being charged with having negotiated inflated contracts and political kickbacks in connection with Peru's school lunch program.

The corruption crises mirror those that have dogged the right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri in Argentina, like Kuczynski a wealthy businessman, whose election victory over the Peronists a year ago was hailed by the Western media as part of the end of the so-called "turn to the left" in Latin America. Both Macri's vice president and his public media minister have been placed under investigation for corruption, while he himself was implicated in offshore dealings by the Panama Papers.

The right-wing turn being pursued by Kuczynski and Macri, not to mention Brazil's Michel Temer, brought to power through the impeachment of Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff, was prepared by the anti-working class policies pursued by their supposedly "left" predecessors. In Peru's case, Humala, an ex-army officer who was first elected on basis of vague nationalist demagoguery and promises to promote social equality, swiftly emerged as the most pliant servant of the foreign banks and corporations, particularly the major mining companies.

In the wake of the initial corruption revelations surrounding his health adviser, and a sharp drop in his approval ratings, Kuczynski enacted a so-called "civil death" law that would supposedly bar anyone convicted on corruption charges of ever again holding public position.

Kuczynski was able to unilaterally implement the law under decree powers that the Peruvian congress unanimously granted him last September in relation to crime, corruption and reorganizing the state-run energy firm, Petroperu. The 90-day emergency powers relating to these areas were approved with the support of the

pseudo-left Frente Amplio.

Kuczynski's anti-corruption rhetoric has gone hand-in-hand with increasing attacks on the Peruvian working class.

A worker was killed in a confrontation on October 18 at the Las Bambas mega-mining project in the Apurimac region, one of the poorest areas of the country. Some 5,000 peasants have blocked access roads to the giant copper mine, which is run by the Chinese firm MMG, stalling its operations. The killing has cast light on a system in which the foreign mining companies make payments to federal police forces to protect their facilities, thereby ensuring their loyalty in confrontations with Peruvian workers and peasants.

Meanwhile, doctors went on a 72-hour strike Tuesday to protest deteriorating conditions in Ministry of Health hospitals, demanding an increase in the sector's budget and protesting official corruption and the failure to pay previously negotiated salary increases.



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