

# Thousands protest in Peru against impeachment, pandemic and economic implosion

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Wednesday was the third day of mass protests across Peru. Thousands mobilized in protests against the political, economic and health crises racking this South American country. The demonstrators were met with water cannon and police repression.

On Monday, November 9, Peru's Congress removed President Martín Vizcarra from office. The next day Vizcarra was replaced by Manuel Merino, president of the Congress. Demonstrations took place in various cities in opposition to Vizcarra's ouster. As president until elections are held on April 11, 2021, Merino is also continuing to preside over congress.

Merino is the third president in the span of one presidential term; Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, Vizcarra's predecessor, was elected in 2016.

Merino defended the congressional action, defining it as a "process of democratic transition" to defend the Peruvian nation and declaring that the assembly's votes "were not purchased" and followed due process.

Vizcarra had been impeached for "permanent moral incapacity." It was alleged that he had received bribes connected to construction projects in 2011-2014, when Vizcarra was governor of the southern province of Moquegua. The accusations are based upon plea bargains by other defendants, without any trial or even investigation having taken place.

Vizcarra's removal resulted from the legislature's second impeachment attempt. An impeachment attempt two months ago, allegedly for "influence peddling," did not obtain the required two-thirds vote of the legislature.

The US State Department indicated that US officials were "following events closely."

"We look to Peruvian institutions to uphold the

constitution and the rule of law," a spokesman declared. "We note that national elections are scheduled for April. As a region of democracy and prosperity, we call on Peruvians to continue to pursue their political ends via a peaceful, lawful, democratic process."

Ironically and hypocritically, the statement came on the same day that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told a State Department news conference that there would be a "smooth transition to a second Trump administration," backing the attempt by the White House to overturn the results of the US presidential elections.

The State Department's declaration had more to do with its desire to quell the popular reaction to Vizcarra's removal than with any genuine defense of the democratic process.

In Lima, Peru's capital, the decision to replace Vizcarra with Merino brought many people into the streets. On Monday night and Tuesday, crowds marched and rallied to protest the Merino's appointment. A Tuesday protest march along the streets of downtown Lima was blocked from reaching the Congress building. In the course of ten hours of protests, dozens were arrested and several were injured by the police.

Protests are also taking place in the cities of Ayacucho, Cusco, Trujillo, Piura and Iquitos, centers of mining and industry.

While Vizcarra has denied all the accusations against him, political corruption has been endemic in Peru's ruling elites. Vizcarra himself became president upon the resignation of President Kuczynski because of corruption charges in March 2018 involving the

Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. Nearly every living Peruvian ex-president has been implicated in corruption probes.

Vizcarra's removal was carried out by all the political parties represented in the legislature. Sixty-eight out of those who voted (out of 130 legislators) have themselves been accused of corrupt practices and are barred from running again for office.

Vizcarra's removal and the appointment of Merino have taken place in the context of a deepening social and economic crisis. In addition to its government being racked by accusations of corruption, Peru is an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rate in the Americas.

While the Peruvian politicians continue to enrich themselves through service to the country's financial oligarchy and foreign capital, Peru implodes. By August of this year, Peru's gross domestic product had declined 30 percent; unemployment is 40 percent higher than in 2019. Many companies have declared bankruptcy and Peru's economy has yet to bottom out.

Tourism has contracted by 90 percent, construction by 67 percent and mining by 37 percent.

Like his predecessor, Vizcarra ruled as an enemy of the working class and agent of the mining cartels. In June, following three months of lockdown, without having stopped the coronavirus and under pressure from the ruling class, Vizcarra opened the economy, with devastating effects. Hospitals have run out of resources; the rate of new cases and deaths continues to accelerate. A regime headed by Merino will only deepen the attacks on the Peruvian working class.



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