Tens of thousands pay homage to youth slain by police as Peru swears in third president in a week

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Thousands of youth held vigils on Monday evening in Peru's major cities in memory of two young students killed by the Peruvian National Police (PNP) in a national march last Saturday.

It was the second such march last week, made up overwhelmingly of Peruvian youth, to protest the parliamentary coup that illegally installed the president of the Congress, Manuel Merino, as interim president. The Congress overthrew President Martin Vizcarra, who was impeached on the charge of "permanent moral incapacity" based on unproven allegations of having taken bribes while governor of the mining region of Moquegua between 2011 and 2014.

Merino was forced to resign Sunday afternoon in the face of the continuing mass protests and popular outrage over the killing of the two demonstrators. Late Monday, the Peruvian parliament elected the country's third president in just one week, Congressman Francisco Sagasti, 76.

The two slain students were Inti Sotelo Camargo, 24, who died from a bullet wound in his chest, and Jack Bryan Pintado Sanchez, 22, who suffered wounds from 10 projectiles fired into his face and neck.

At least 107 other people were injured by projectiles—both rubber bullets and live ammunition were used—toxic gases and beatings. One is known to be paralyzed from the waist down and another to have lost an eye, while others may be permanently disabled.

While "interim president" Merino approved of the use of excessive and brutal repression, the PNP had long been preparing such tactics for use against a mass uprising.

Peru's repressive security forces have played an increasingly dominant role as the country has confronted the highest per capita mortality rate in the world from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the worst economic crisis, with the country's economy shrinking by 30 percent.

The coronavirus pandemic led the Vizcarra government to give the green light to strengthening and deploying the PNP's riot control forces against the population. When a curfew was declared in mid-March, Vizcarra, with the support of the Armed Forces, deployed hundreds of police armed with high-powered rifles in all the districts of the city. Hundreds of people were arrested between March and November for violating the curfew, especially in the working-class neighborhoods. A late-night curfew remains in effect.

Reporting on Saturday's police repression, the Peruvian daily *El Comercio* stated, "Despite national and international calls to avoid such reprisals, riot police fired a hail of tear gas bombs and used shotguns with pellets against citizens who confronted them as they tried to advance down Abancay Avenue toward the Congress building."

Spain's *El País* in an article titled "In memoriam of the heroes of the Bicentennial generation in Peru," reported: "From health personnel who watched the marches to the Ombudsman's Office, they were attacked by police officers who did not hesitate to obey the orders of repression. Not only did they use rubber bullets to shoot at the bodies of the protesters, but they also used metal projectiles, marbles, tear gas bombs, and concussion bombs. Some young people reported wounded could lose their sight, others might not walk again, many were left with projectile wounds."

The marches represent the eruption of years of accumulated anger against the politicians of all the bourgeois parties, which, mired in corruption and presiding over unprecedented social inequality, have led the country into the greatest economic and health crisis in modern history.

When Merino resigned from the presidency, it was initially announced that Rocio Silva Santisteban of the pseudo-left Frente Amplio would be selected by the Congress as its leader, and as a result the next president. There is little doubt that this maneuver to install a representative of the pseudo-left at the head of a right-wing, military-dominated government was seen as means of pacifying the mass

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outrage. In the end, however, predominant sections of the bourgeoisie demanded a more reliable representative of their interests and those of foreign capital, upon which they depend.

On November 17, a new president was sworn in, Francisco Sagasti of the center-right Partido Morado (Purple Party, so-named to designate unity of red and blue, the left and right). A former World Bank executive, he was chosen by the bourgeoisie because of his close contacts with the US and finance capital. He worked for the World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s, when it was imposing draconian privatization and austerity programs in Latin America, and has a doctorate from Wharton, the prestigious business school of the University of Pennsylvania, the cradle of many of the financial thieves who direct Wall Street's main banks and finance firms.

While Sagasti was being sworn in as president on Tuesday, businessmen, noting that he was one of their own, said that first the economy had to be reactivated and the spread of COVID-19 allowed to continue its course until a vaccine was found, either abroad or produced by the Peruvian medical university Cayetano Heredia.

Throughout his professional life, Sagasti, a well-known technocrat, has moved between business circles, nationally and internationally, and academia. He is a professor at the Universidad Católica del Perú and previously taught at the Universidad del Pacífico business school.

In an attempt to assuage the mass anger in the streets, Sagasti invited the relatives of the two youth murdered by the police to attend the swearing-in ceremony and repeatedly saluted the young protesters. This purely opportunistic maneuver will soon be forgotten as Sagasti moves forward to fulfill the demands of Peruvian and international capital. Meanwhile, the youth have declared that they will continue to protest and confront the police, if necessary, until the murderers of Inti and Bryan are brought to justice.

On her Twitter account, the candidate for the 2016 presidency of the bourgeois left, Veronika Mendoza, wrote that the protests had brought to power "a transitional government and a parliamentary leadership without coup-makers or corrupt people," thus defending the new president who represents the interests of foreign capital, especially that of the United States. Like her counterparts in Chile, she has advanced the proposal for a "constituent assembly" to rewrite Peru's 1993 constitution as a means of diverting the mass youth uprising back under the domination of the bourgeois state.

Contrary to Mendoza's attempt to build up illusions in the regime, many youth have no confidence in any member of the political class, including Sagasti. They have seen four presidents in the past two years—only one of them popularly elected—and every living president, along with the majority of Congress, implicated in bribery and kickback scandals.

Yesterday, vigils were held in all the main cities of Peru. The main one took place in Lima's San Martin Square, the meeting place of the marches, which was once again filled with people honoring the memory of the two murdered youth. There were also vigils at Plaza Bolivar in front of the Congress of the Republic, Kennedy Park in Miraflores and several districts of the capital.

In the second city of the country, Arequipa, a crowd gathered in front of the city's cathedral. As in Lima, participants dressed in black and came with white candles. A minute's silence was observed for the life of Inti and Bryan. A contingent from the National University of San Agustin (UNSA) joined the vigil.

Similar demonstrations were held in Trujillo, in Cusco's Plaza de Armas and in the northern cities of Tumbes and Piura, as well as in the Amazonian cities of Tarapoto and Iquitos.

In the highland city on the shores of Lake Titicaca, Puno, the young people said, "We don't know them, but their deaths hurt us."

The popular explosion that is now entering its ninth day is the response of the Peruvian masses, and in particular the youth, to the intolerable conditions of life created by the disastrous response of the capitalist government to the COVID-19 pandemic and the deep economic recession that is driving millions of families back into extreme poverty.

A solution to these immense problems will not be forthcoming from the newly installed administration headed by the "technocrat" Sagasiti or any other capitalist government. Only the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist perspective, can take forward the fight for democracy and equality in Peru and throughout the Americas.

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