

COVID-19 catastrophe overshadows Peru election

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27 April 2021

With Peru heading toward a second-round election pitting former teachers strike leader Pedro Castillo against Keiko Fujimori, leader of the Peruvian right and daughter of a jailed former autocrat, the country is reeling under the impact of the latest deadly surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

New and more contagious variants of the coronavirus have fueled a record rise in both infections and fatalities. In addition to the P.1 variant from Brazil, a newly identified C.37 variant is spreading rapidly in both Peru and Chile.

The average daily death toll has risen to 378, with one Peruvian dying every four minutes. Peru trails only Brazil in terms of Latin American per-capita death rates.

The surge has brought the health care system to a state of collapse. Many hospitals are reportedly operating at 150 percent capacity, with patients filling cafeterias, hallways, waiting rooms and tent facilities set up in parking lots. Last week it was reported that there were only 64 open intensive care (ICU) beds across the country. The national Health Ministry (MINSA) reported that 2,524 Peruvians were on mechanical ventilators, a 63 percent increase over the height of the pandemic's first surge last year.

Along with mass death and illness, the pandemic has also sharply accelerated Peru's descent into economic crisis. Previously touted for the fastest economic growth in Latin America, last year Peru saw its economy plummet by more than 11 percent. Unemployment and poverty have dramatically increased, with the loss of 2.2 million jobs and, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 1.8 million Peruvians falling below the poverty line, a growth in poverty that the IMF described as "without precedent." Fully 27.5 percent of the population is now classified as poor.

The working class has been the hardest hit by the pandemic, with the government classifying mining and other profit-making enterprises as "essential." The devastating effect of the virus in crowded mining camps has led to a wave of protests and strikes, including an indefinite strike by miners at the Shougang Hierro Perú mine, where 24 workers have died of COVID-19.

This social and economic catastrophe wrought by the profits-over-lives policy of the Peruvian government has intersected with a protracted crisis of bourgeois rule in Peru, which has had four presidents in little more than four years. Every living ex-president—and one, Alan Garcia, who committed suicide rather than going to jail—has been implicated in a vast web of corruption, most of it involving bribes and kickbacks from Brazilian

construction giant Odebrecht and its local contractors.

Popular anger against the ruling establishment erupted last November after Congress—more than half of whose members are facing similar charges—impeached then-President Martín Vizcarra on the basis of unproven corruption allegations in what many saw as a right-wing coup. The move provoked the largest protests seen in Peru in decades, with tens of thousands of Peruvians, most of them students and youth, taking to the streets of Lima and other major cities. While the mass protests forced out the regime installed by the congressional coup, a new government was consolidated under Francisco Sagasti, a former World Bank official.

This was the context in which national elections were held on April 11, with all of the traditional parties of the national bourgeoisie dissolved or discredited, and polls showing barely 10 percent support for any of the 18 presidential candidates participating.

The surprise first-place winner, with 18.92 percent of the vote, was Pedro Castillo, candidate of the Perú Libre party, who now faces Keiko Fujimori of the right-wing Fuerza Popular (13.4 percent) in a second round to be held in six weeks. The latest poll shows Castillo with a nearly two-to-one lead—41.5 to 21.5 percent—over Fujimori in the run-up to June's second round.

The election's first round saw a relatively high abstention rate—roughly 30 percent—in a country where voting is mandatory by law. In addition, the vote that put Castillo in first place trailed the number of ballots that were spoiled or cast blank in opposition to the entire political setup.

This has not stopped elements of the pseudo-left internationally from immediately hailing Castillo as the latest incarnation of the "Pink Tide" in Latin America. The Pabloite International Marxist Tendency, for example, declared that "it is obvious that wide layers of workers and peasants have expressed and will express their rejection of the established order and their search for solutions that favour the interests of the majority through Castillo's candidacy." It added that "Revolutionary Marxists are duty-bound to accompany the masses in this experience."

Similarly, *Jacobin* magazine, associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the US, declared that "The odds were stacked against Evo Morales but he managed to change Bolivia for the better. In Peru the same is also possible," offering electoral support for Castillo by insisting that the "first task" is "defeating Keiko Fujimori."

Castillo first gained national prominence as the leader of a 50-day teachers strike in 2017. He subsequently joined Perú Libre, a party led by the ex-governor of the central highlands department of Junín, Vladimir Cerrón. Perú Libre combines pseudo-socialist rhetoric with provincial corruption and extreme right-wing social policies, including virulent nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia, as well as the denunciation of “gender ideology,” same-sex marriage and abortion.

It is noteworthy that the words coronavirus and COVID-19 do not appear in Perú Libre’s platform. To the extent that Castillo has dealt at all with the pandemic in his campaign, it has been to compete with his right-wing opponent Fujimori in demagogic denunciations of lockdowns.

Fujimori has made it clear that she will run a far-right campaign against socialism, while appealing directly to the armed forces and the police for support.

No sooner had Castillo’s victory in the first round triggered a fall on the Peruvian financial markets and in the value of the sol against the dollar, than the supposed “leftist” candidate began executing a sharp shift to the right.

Castillo declared that his government would “give juridical security to our businessmen,” while repudiating sections of his party’s program that call for nationalization of mining and other “strategic sectors” of the economy. “I completely reject those who say Pedro Castillo is going to nationalize,” he said on April 22 in an interview with Radio Existoso.

He will doubtless make this same case in a debut appearance at a virtual gathering of Perumin, the annual meeting of Peru’s mining executives this week.

In the same radio interview, Castillo delivered a gratuitous insult to Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro, who is demonized by the right wing in Peru as throughout Latin America. “I want to openly say to Mr. Maduro that, please, if there is something you have to say concerning Peru, that first you should solve your internal problems, that you should come and take back your compatriots who have come here to commit crimes.”

Maduro had issued no statement on Castillo’s victory or any other aspect of Peruvian politics. The vilification of Venezuelan immigrants, roughly 1 million of whom are in Peru, was of a piece with Castillo’s viciously anti-immigrant rhetoric during the campaign, which has included a promise that once he is elected, he will give all of the foreigners who “have come to commit crimes” 72 hours to get out of the country.

Castillo’s evolution is entirely predictable, following a well-worn path. In 2011, the ex-army officer Ollanta Humala was elected as the candidate of the Peruvian Nationalist Party (PNP) after campaigning as an opponent of “neo-liberalism” and a sympathizer of the “Bolivarian Socialism” of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Like Castillo, he ran against Keiko Fujimori in the second round.

Within a year of taking office, he was being hailed by Wall Street for presiding over the most profitable “emerging market” in Latin America. At the same time, Humala exposed the real class character of his government by imposing martial law and killing scores of protesters demonstrating against environmental damage inflicted by giant mining multinationals in the region of Cajamarca

and the province of Espinar in Cuzco.

Humala was put in a position to carry out these crimes and to establish his right-wing, anti-working class government thanks to the complicity of virtually all the significant forces of Peru’s pseudo-left, the major unions, the Stalinists and the so-called defense fronts in the provinces.

These same forces are now rallying behind Castillo. Already the CGTP, Peru’s main union federation, has issued a radical-sounding endorsement of Castillo, as has the Nuevo Perú party of pseudo-left standard bearer Verónica Mendoza, which claimed his election would create “the possibility of a profound change.”

Such pseudo-left organizations, whose politics reflect the interests of more privileged layers of the middle class, are attracted to elements like Humala and Castillo precisely because they represent not an independent movement of the working class from below, but rather bourgeois movements, whose policies are directed at suppressing the class struggle and subordinating the working class to the interests of Peruvian and international capital.

These political tendencies, which promoted similar illusions in Brazil’s Workers Party, *Chavismo* in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia, bear responsibility for politically disarming the Latin American working class in the face of the attacks by the so-called “left” governments as well as the serious threats of dictatorship posed from the right.

The bitter lessons of this entire experience are summed up in the burning necessity of forging the political independence of the working class in opposition to these bourgeois parties and governments and their pseudo-left supporters. Revolutionary parties must be built in Peru and throughout Latin America as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International to unite the working class in the struggle for workers power and socialism.



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