

Pedro Castillo's rise to the presidency intensifies Peru's crisis

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Since being sworn in as president of Peru on July 28, Pedro Castillo, the rural teacher and former strike leader, has sought to prove himself as a defender of private property and foreign investment.

Castillo won the presidency with the vote of the poorest and most exploited regions in the Andes and southern Peru. The narrow victory of just 44,000 votes over his far-right rival, Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the now imprisoned ex-dictator Alberto Fujimori, reflected deep and explosive divisions in a country dominated by social inequality and ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opposed by decisive sections of the Peruvian ruling oligarchy and portrayed by the media and his right-wing opponents as a “communist” and “terrorist sympathizer,” Castillo is already signaling the bourgeoisie that his government—his populist promises notwithstanding—can be trusted to suppress any threats to profit interests or disruption of law and order.

On his fourth day in office, August 2, Castillo sent his prime minister, Guido Bellido, to the province of Chumbivilcas in the department of Cusco, with the mission of ending a strike by seven peasant communities against the Chinese mining consortium, MMG Las Bambas, a US\$5 billion investment. Bellido's intervention succeeded in securing a 60-day suspension of the indefinite strike that threatened the export of copper to China. His mission to pacify the angry peasants was also aimed at blunting the right-wing media's vilification of him as a “communist” and an enemy of private property.

The peasants had begun an indefinite strike on July 24 after suffering repression at the hands of the police, leaving six women and 10 men wounded by gunfire and tear gas bombs.

The betrayal of the peasants' struggle, summed up in Bellido's announcement that their demands “are not easily resolved,” has a precedent in the recent history of Peru. Four months after taking office, former President Ollanta Humala (2011-2016) betrayed a peasants' struggle against another transnational seeking to exploit the Conga mining deposit. The episode defined the reactionary character of Humala, who, like Castillo, campaigned for the presidency based on nationalist and populist slogans along with vague promises of a redistribution of wealth.

Castillo, meanwhile, has rushed to reassure foreign investors. Reuters reported that the new president “has met with the Chinese ambassador and Chinese mining executives to discuss not just policies for their industry but also to strengthen a previous free

trade agreement first signed in 2009.”

His meeting with Chinese investors was well received in international financial circles. “This doesn't have an ideological character, this has a pragmatic character,” Jorge Heine, a professor of international relations at Boston University and a former Chilean ambassador to China, told Reuters.

Reuters added: “In addition to China, Peru also has a free trade agreement with the US and has been considered for decades a US ally.” The US ambassador was the first to recognize and congratulate Castillo after he was declared the elected president.

Castillo has pledged to impose additional taxes on the super profits of the transnational mining corporations to fund increased health and education spending. China has surpassed the US as Peru's top trade partner. “Mining tax policy will be crucial to China, whose companies are important copper miners in Peru, the world's No. 2 producer of the metal,” says Reuters.

The Anglo American PLC mining corporation's chief executive Mark Cutifani dismissed any threats to profits from the new government, stating on Thursday that his company's interactions with the incoming Castillo government had been “pretty positive.”

Castillo has further attempted to calm the financial markets with the appointment to two key ministries of individuals acceptable within Peru's ruling establishment: Pedro Francke as Minister of Economy and Finance (MEF) and Aníbal Torres as Minister of Justice and Human Rights (MinJus).

Francke, a professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and former World Bank official, served as Castillo's emissary to Peruvian capitalists along with Wall Street and foreign investors during the run-off election contest, assuring them that he would carry out no nationalizations or any other inroads on private property.

Aníbal Torres is a professor at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. Since Castillo's placing first in the first round of the election on April 9, Torres has served as Peru Libre's main legal advisor in confronting the protracted and unfounded claims of election fraud brought by the camp of his rival, Keiko Fujimori.

The appointment of Francke and Torres followed Castillo's naming a cabinet comprised largely of provincial and inexperienced politicians, some belonging to the inner circle of Vladimir Cerron, the founder of the party that ran Castillo for president, Perú Libre. It is a corrupt regionalist party that employs pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, along with a reactionary social agenda, to appeal to the indigenous population's deep hostility to the ruling

elite based in the capital, Lima.

Perú Libre originated in 2008 under the name of Regional Political Movement Peru. Cerron is facing corruption charges for heading during his governorship of the department of Junín (2011-2014, 2019-2020) the gang known as “Los Dinámicos del Centro,” which engaged in influence peddling and the illegal sale of drivers’ licenses.

Wearing his traditional straw hat and suit with indigenous designs, Castillo used his inaugural speech to declare that “foreign criminals will have 72 hours from today to leave the country.” He also attacked unemployed youth saying, “Young people who do not study, or work, will have to go into military service.”

The first statement was meant to scapegoat immigrants—more than a million Venezuelans have come to Peru—for rising unemployment, hunger and crime. The second was a clear threat that the new government will not tolerate uprisings of the youth nor of the working class and the poor.

Still fresh in the memory of the youth is the attack they suffered at the hands of the National Police in November of last year, when they rebelled against the attempt of the president of Congress, Manuel Merino, to take over the presidency of the republic, after the Congress ousted President Martín Vizcarra in a parliamentary coup. Police shot two young protesters to death and wounded over 100 more.

A series of strikes and demonstrations have broken out throughout the country in recent months, including a 48-hour strike last week in protest over the increase in prices of basic foodstuffs that left the city of Cuzco without public transportation. There have also been revolts in mining areas, plus multiple road blockades by peasant communities complaining about the devastation of their lands by mining transnationals.

Castillo called on the *ronderos*, peasant security patrols, to collaborate with the police in the fight against crime, while “respecting their autonomy.” The *ronderos* developed as an arm of counterrevolutionary repression during the dirty war waged under the Peruvian dictator Alberto Fujimori against the Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist guerrilla movement. Together with the army, they engaged in war crimes against the civilian population. Castillo’s bid to incorporate them into the repressive apparatus of the state, reportedly to include government funding, threatens to further the consolidation of a police state.

In his speech, Castillo also emphasized opening the schools beginning in 2022, thus ignoring the imminent threat of a third wave of the coronavirus. In Peru, the Delta strain has already been detected in the capital, Lima, and the most populous city in the south of the country, Arequipa. The coronavirus pandemic has already claimed the lives of 200,000 citizens, leaving Peru with the highest death rate per million inhabitants in the world and more fatalities in absolute numbers than Russia, the UK, Italy or France.

The rabidly anticommunist sections of the Peruvian bourgeoisie, having failed in their efforts to overturn the election, are now concentrating their fire on Castillo’s cabinet, claiming its members are incompetent, corrupt and sympathizers of Sendero Luminoso. Leaders of the right-wing majority in the Congress have threatened to not ratify their nominations, including that of Castillo’s prime minister, Guido Bellido.

They have also singled out Castillo’s nominee for foreign minister, Héctor Béjar, an 85-year-old university professor who participated in a short-lived Castroite guerrilla movement in the 1960s. He has aroused the ire of the right by stating that the Castillo government will withdraw from the Lima Group. Originally comprised of 11 Latin American countries and Canada, the group was formed in 2017 to support Washington’s regime change campaign against Venezuela. Mexico, Argentina and Bolivia have already withdrawn from the group.

Behind the attacks on the cabinet appointments, the Peruvian right, which controls the Congress, is preparing the ouster of Castillo himself. Right-wing politicians are increasingly raising the prospect of Congress declaring a “presidential vacancy” based on the supposed “moral incapacity” of Castillo to hold the office.

Several hundred demonstrators gathered in Lima’s Plaza San Martín Saturday to demand Castillo’s immediate ouster, while appealing to the Peruvian armed forces to intervene.

When this same form of constitutional coup was carried out last November to remove President Martín Vizcarra, it triggered the largest demonstrations in Peru in the last two decades, forcing the congressional leader designated as Vizcarra’s successor to resign. The removal of Castillo by these methods would likely ignite far greater upheavals.

If Castillo’s government survives these challenges, its ascendance will not signify a revival of Latin America’s “Pink Tide” and a new era of social reforms, even of a minimal character. Having guaranteed the sanctity of private ownership and the interests of the mining transnationals, its policies will be dictated by the Peruvian bourgeoisie and the international markets, even as the Peruvian right and the military prepare a coup.

The decisive question in Peru, as throughout Latin America, is the political mobilization of the working class, independent of every section of the bourgeoisie and all its political parties, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program that can overthrow the dictatorship of finance capital and resolve the pandemic crisis in the interests of the workers and impoverished masses.



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