

# Peru's ruling elite unleashes anti-communist tirade after Shining Path leader's death

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The September 11 death of Abimael Guzmán, founder and ideological leader of the Maoist guerrilla group Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL), has unleashed a hysterical torrent of anti-communist propaganda from every section of the Peruvian ruling establishment and corporate media.

Guzmán, better known by his nom de guerre, Chairman Gonzalo, has been cast as the incarnation of evil. He has been portrayed as singlehandedly responsible for the deaths of some 70,000 Peruvians in the bloody internal armed conflict initiated by Shining Path in 1980, even though at least half of them were killed by government security forces and their allied militias.

A report published by the RPP media conglomerate on Guzmán's death was typical, beginning: "Bloodthirsty, merciless, cruel. There is no precise adjective to classify the evil of the chief of the Sendero Luminoso terrorist group ..."

In the days following Guzmán's death, the political life of the country was dominated by a heated and macabre debate over what was to be done with his corpse.

Finally on September 17, recently inaugurated President Pedro Castillo signed into law a bill passed by Peru's congress providing for the summary cremation of those convicted of terrorism or treason, with the Ministry of Justice empowered to dispose of the ashes as it saw fit. The new law warns that the normal burial of bodies of such individuals may "put at risk national security or internal order."

No one has made a serious case for the body of the 86-year-old Guzmán, who died of pneumonia at the Naval prison where he had been held for nearly three decades, posing such a threat to the Peruvian state. The claim by right-wing legislators that his tomb would become a rallying point for Shining Path supporters is absurd. The Maoist group has had no significant presence in Peru for decades, its remnants reduced to criminal gangs working with drug dealers.

The anti-communist tirade unleashed by the Peruvian bourgeoisie in response to the death of the aged prisoner has several purposes. First, it is an intensification of a longstanding practice of vilifying any left-wing opposition as "terrorist" and is aimed at intimidating Peruvian workers, youth and rural poor under conditions of an unprecedented social and economic crisis sharply exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed more lives per capita in Peru than in any other country in the world.

## Pushing Castillo government to the right

Second, it is aimed at intimidating and pushing ever further to the right Peruvian President Pedro Castillo, the former rural teachers strike leader who took office in late July. His right-wing opponents and much of the

media have cast him and his supporters as Shining Path sympathizers, demanding the dismissal of cabinet members and laying the groundwork for ousting his government entirely.

The three-time defeated presidential candidate of the ultra-right Popular Force party, Keiko Fujimori, spoke about "banishing his [Guzmán's] bloody ideology and those who promote it, who today infiltrate the government."

Castillo responded with his own obligatory statement denouncing Guzmán for taking "countless lives" and declaring, "Our position condemning terrorism is firm and unwavering." He went on to tout his participation in the *rondas campesinas*, or peasant self-defense committees, in the northern highlands region of Cajamarca. The *rondas* were allied with the security forces in the suppression of the Shining Path insurgency and were themselves responsible for numerous atrocities.

The Peruvian president is currently on a five-day mission to the US directed at convincing Wall Street, the major corporations, the IMF and the World Bank that they have nothing to fear from his populist rhetoric.

Finally, the furor promoted over Guzmán's death is aimed at preventing a new generation of Peruvian workers, students and oppressed from drawing the real lessons of the bitter experience with Shining Path and the dirty war fought by the Peruvian state against it.

The origins of what became known as the Peruvian Communist Party-Shining Path lay in the Sino-Soviet split of 1961, when China's Mao Zedong denounced the Soviet Union's leadership as "revisionist" and "traitors" after growing conflicts over Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech exposing the crimes of Stalin and over Moscow's policy of "peaceful coexistence" with US imperialism. These disputes were rooted in the diverging interests of the two nationally based Stalinist bureaucracies.

Falsely posturing as a more radical alternative to the policies of the pro-Moscow Communist parties, Maoism appealed to a layer of students and intellectuals radicalized by the wave of postwar social struggles in Latin America. Such was the case with Guzmán, who was born into a middle-class family in Arequipa in 1934, and became a professor of philosophy at a university in Ayacucho, one of the poorest Andean regions that would be the epicenter of Peru's internal conflict.

## Inspired by "Cultural Revolution"

He traveled to China during the "Cultural Revolution" of 1966-67, in which Mao mobilized student youth and later elements of the lumpen proletariat and poor peasants, who were organized in the so-called Red Guards, to settle accounts with rivals within the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy.

Guzmán took his inspiration from this retrograde movement, which denounced virtually everyone and everything related to science and

culture as “bourgeois,” while the doggerel of Mao’s “Little Red Book” was transformed into a state religion.

Returning to Peru, Guzmán founded Shining Path as a split from Peru’s original Maoist group, Communist Party of Peru—Bandera Roja (Red Flag), insisting on immediate preparations for armed struggle and a “people’s war.” The core of the new organization was composed of Guzmán’s fellow professors, as well as students from Ayacucho’s Huamanga University who came from rural peasant areas.

The moment chosen by Shining Path for launching this armed struggle in 1980 was the eve of the first election following the Peruvian military’s decision to cede power to a civilian government after 12 years of rule by the generals. On the day before the election, a group of Shining Path members attacked a voter registration office and burned ballot boxes in the town of Chuschi in Ayacucho.

The end of military rule had been forced by mass strikes by the working class. The upsurge against the military regime led to the growth of left-wing parties and trade unions, which returned to legality, and the radicalization of millions of Peruvian workers and youth seeking an alternative to capitalism.

The Maoist ideology promoted by Guzmán was hostile to this movement and to the working class as a whole. It rejected the Marxist perspective of the revolutionary mobilization of the working class and the struggle to educate a revolutionary leadership in the working class. Instead, it advanced the pernicious theory of “people’s war” based on protracted warfare by a peasant-based army encircling the cities. In practice, this was reduced to terrorist attacks in which the masses were relegated to the role of passive spectators.

To this end, it conducted assassinations of leftists, union officials, leaders of peasant organizations and workers who failed to observe Shining Path-decreed strikes. It attacked factories, destroyed machinery and dynamited power pylons and roads, cutting off electricity and food supplies to the cities.

It was initially able to gain some support from among an oppressed layer of Quechua-speaking peasants in southern Peru by attacking corrupt and repressive government officials and institutions and carrying out vigilante justice against criminals. Shining Path increasingly engaged in savage attacks against the rural population, however, after the government declared a state of emergency in Ayacucho in 1983 and sent the armed forces into a “dirty war” to suppress the insurgency. Shining Path responded with violence to the peasantry’s failure to live up to its Maoist perspective of casting the peasants as the leading revolutionary force.

Impoverished peasants found themselves in the crossfire between the Maoist guerrillas and the military, subjected to reprisals and counter-reprisals on the grounds of alleged collaboration with one side or the other. A 2003 report issued by Peru’s Truth Commission found that 79 percent of the internal conflict’s victims lived in rural areas and that 75 percent spoke “Quechua or other native languages as their mother tongue.”

### Guzmán’s capture and Shining Path’s collapse

By the time of Guzmán’s capture in Lima in September 1992, Shining Path had already lost its ability to operate in the southern and central highlands due both to military repression and the government’s arming of the peasant *rondas*, which aligned themselves with the security forces to put an end to the bloody war.

The movement’s defeat was also bound up with global changes, most significantly the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union and the broader collapse of movements basing themselves on national

programs. The same period saw the Sandinistas ousted from power in Nicaragua and the winding up of the guerrilla insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala.

A major element of Shining Path’s ideology had been a cult of personality around Guzmán, who was proclaimed the “fourth sword of Marxism” after Marx, Lenin and Mao, with his writings propagated as “Gonzalo Thought.” With his capture, along with several other leading members, there was no political leadership to direct the Maoist group’s operations.

Shortly after his capture, Guzmán renounced the armed struggle and formally surrendered to the Peruvian state. Shining Path rapidly collapsed, with insignificant remnants continuing operations in league with narco-traffickers.

The anti-communist uproar surrounding Guzmán’s death has been accompanied by a glorification of the security forces—responsible for countless massacres, executions, acts of torture, rape and abuse—as the saviors of Peruvian “democracy.”

In reality, what followed Guzmán’s capture was not a flowering of democracy but rather a dictatorship imposed by means of the *autogolpe* (self-coup) carried out by President Alberto Fujimori, who in 1992 dissolved the parliament and suspended the judicial system, arrogating to himself the right to rule by decree. State violence only intensified, with vicious repression of anyone daring to criticize the regime or the security forces as “terrorist sympathizers,” and massacres carried out against innocent civilians.

Today Fujimori is serving a 25-year sentence for crimes against humanity and corruption, while his principal accomplice, the sinister intelligence chief and CIA “asset” Vladimiro Montesinos is jailed at the same naval prison where Guzmán died.

The Peruvian working class must reject with contempt the anti-communist propaganda of the bourgeoisie, while learning the lessons of the bitter price paid because of Maoism, a tendency that combines bourgeois nationalism, peasant radicalism and Stalinism for the purpose of blocking the construction of genuine proletarian revolutionary parties.

In Latin America, Maoism’s influence was facilitated by the Pabloite revisionist tendency that rejected both the revolutionary role of the proletariat and the paramount mission of the revolutionary party in fighting for the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. Instead, the Pabloites sought to liquidate the cadres of the Fourth International into Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism, petty-bourgeois guerrillaism and Maoism.

If the capitalist parties and media are so intent on exploiting the death of Guzmán to promote anti-communism and exalt the security forces, it is because they know that revolutionary struggles are on the horizon in a country where the conditions of the masses of workers, youth and rural poor have become intolerable under the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and deepening economic crisis. The decisive question is the building of a new revolutionary leadership, a Peruvian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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