

From Pedro Castillo to Dina Boluarte or the endless crisis in Peru

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The Peruvian president tried to shut down the Congress, which wanted to impeach him, in an almost inexplicable leap into the void. A few minutes later, he was arrested and replaced by the vice-president.

The Peruvian political crisis has taken a turn. After assuming power on July 28, 2021 as an expression of the “Peru of the people”, despised by the Lima elites, Pedro Castillo never found his way. He changed one cabinet after another, lost allies, became politically erratic, and ended up depending on shadowy circles of advisers and embroiled in growing allegations of corruption from his entourage and family. But it was his decision to shut down Congress - which he accused of obstructionism in a quavering speech - that sealed his end.

Two hours later, the majority to dismiss the President, which until then Congress had lacked, was theirs and in a few minutes he was arrested, apparently while trying to reach the Mexican embassy. How can this acceleration of the crisis and the mistakes of the Peruvian president be explained? In this interview, Marisa Glave offers some insights. Between 2007 and 2013, Glave was a councillor of the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima and between 2016 and 2019, a congressman of the Republic. She is currently an associate researcher at the Center for Development Studies and Promotion (DESCO).

Pablo Stefanoni - How do you explain Pedro Castillo's clumsiness in dissolving Congress without anticipating that in a few minutes he would be completely alone, at a time when Congress also did not have the votes to dismiss him?

Marisa Glave - Pedro Castillo's original sin was not only how he put together his Cabinet, but also how he gave rise to a shadowy palatial atmosphere. After forming a broader cabinet, with figures from various progressive sectors, he ended up sitting in an environment that the press has called “the Chotanos” or “the Chiclayanos”, depending on their origin, who concentrated decision-making powers around the president and were also his interlocutors in relation to what was happening in the country.

Let us recall one of the president's most painful interviews, on CNN, in which he said that he did not read newspapers or watch television. In this way, he has been receiving information filtered by those who whispered in his ears. This poorly qualified environment has been making decisions and making mistake after mistake.

President Castillo, for example, appointed as a Minister, Miguel Rodríguez Mackay, who supported the pardon of Alberto Fujimori and even spoke of electoral fraud, an unsubstantiated complaint of Fujimorism and who had made statements against the president himself, whom he had branded as a communist. Castillo also appointed Mariano González as Minister of the Interior, whom he ended up considering as a mole of the coup within his government. There were levels of precariousness and

naivety, and a kind of very strong arrogance among the people who have been making decisions.

Recently Castillo changed two important figures: the head of the National Intelligence Directorate (DINI) and the Defense Minister. He put ex-general Wilson Barrantes in charge of DINI, and Gustavo Bobbio in Defence, two people very much at odds with each other. Today there are many rumours circulating in newsrooms and various places that these two officials would have assured Castillo that he had enough strength, between the Armed Forces and the Police, to advance in closing Congress, towards that absurd coup. Because it was a coup. The police, and evidently the military too, decided de facto not to respond to the president's orders. And then there is a group of political figures from the president's circle, including the premier, Betssy Chávez [33 years old, fifth president of the Council of Ministers since Castillo took office], who I think overestimated the degree of popular support for the president's decision to close Congress and convene a Constituent Assembly.

I would say that these fantasies were accompanied by a real fear on Pedro Castillo's part in the face of the progress of the investigations of the Prosecutor's Office and the emergence of new "effective collaborators" (of justice) with a set of testimonies that began to be leaked to the press. Perhaps the one that has hit him the most is that of the former head of the DINI, José Fernández Latorre, speaking of possible payments to Castillo's relatives, as well as support for officials who are on the run at the moment. And today [December 7], the former head of the advisory cabinet of the Ministry of Housing, Salatiel Marrufo, has given very detailed information regarding a sum of nine million soles (more than two million dollars) that would have been received from a businesswoman to finance a number of activities by President Castillo, and even money that would have come to him. I believe that these fears partly explain the decision to move forward with this authoritarian temptation, which has been seen on the other hand as a characteristic in part of his environment.

Everything ended up developing in a few hours and Peru has another ex-president in jail, it seems like an endless crisis in which all the leaders end up in jail, or even commit suicide like Alan García...

All this could be interpreted as the effectiveness of Peruvian justice, but the truth is that, in reality, these are samples of the precariousness of political representation and a set of blows to the self-confidence of Peruvians. If we look at the IPSOS surveys, Peru is one of the Latin American countries with the least confidence in democracy and the greatest distrust in the authorities. So, how to sustain democracy and institutions when more than 80% of Peruvians believe that the political class only looks to ensure its own continuity -and self-protection- rather than look for minimal transformations or basic guidelines for justice in the country? ?

Castillo was presented as a candidate from "people's Peru" and from the beginning it was seen that his government was following an erratic course, without a parliamentary majority, without ideas and, as you mentioned, with milieux that ended up submerged in the logic of clientelism and corruption. How does this experience affect the Peruvian left?

I believe that the experience of this government, without programmatic clarity, without any basic reform that could give it some banner of social change, of social justice, is going to hit the left hard, and even more so the sector of the authoritarian left, like Peru Libre and other organisations, which maintained their support for the government for a long period. But also for the democratic left, which has been hesitant and has not been able to say clearly — beyond the presence of a right wing coup that existed since day one of Castillo's presidency and did not even recognise his victory at the polls — that it was necessary to clearly distance oneself from a government that had zero desire for transformation. In addition to the aforementioned obvious signs of corruption is a lack of capacity to take minimal steps in terms of health and education after the effects of the pandemic, one of the worst in Latin America.

But I will also say that although all this is going to take its toll on the left, we must not forget that Congress, in the hands of the opposition right that we saw act during this time, has rejection levels close to 90%. We are facing a profound breakdown of political representation as a whole. Which is risky because of the possibility that authoritarian supposed solutions may grow.

How much can this situation favour the extreme right, with figures like the elected mayor of Lima, Rafael López Aliaga?

I believe that the extreme right tends to overstate things. Castillo has “self-vacated” or “self-removed”, and this has been provisionally capitalised on by Congress. However I don’t think that the extreme right will be able to take much advantage of this moment of crisis. Rather, my concern, I will say sincerely, is that projects like that of Antauro Humala, a self-proclaimed ethnonationalist, could grow in some spaces and areas in Peru. These have an authoritarian framework but are different to that of López Aliaga, [Antauro Humala proposed, for example, shooting corrupt ex-presidents, including his brother Ollanta “as a traitor”]

What can be expected from Dina Boluarte, in light of her profile as a Vice-President, as unexpected as was Castillo?

Mrs. Boluarte, on assuming the Presidency, sent out a message calling for national dialogue, for the construction of a broad based unity government, asking for a political truce and committing herself to the fight against corruption. She herself has said that some of the problems are linked to the need for an electoral reform, a reform that is still pending. However, I believe that the new president and those who think that this constitutional succession will generate more stability are making a mistake. It is difficult to think that the majority of Peruvians will accept that this Congress and Dina Boluarte should remain until 2026 as if nothing had happened. My impression is that there will be popular mobilisation in a very complicated context: there is a very severe drought that is affecting part of the country, generating a lot of discomfort among peasants and farmers, who have already been discussing the possibility of a strike... and also the right in parliament, sectors such as Fuerza Popular (Fujimorista), Avanza País (with ties to the Spanish party Vox) or Renovación Nacional (López Aliaga) who have an express will to also seek Boluarte’s departure. Without a parliamentary group of her own, it would be naive on her part to think that she will have a smooth ride in relation to Congress. Boluarte would do well to promote a dialogue on possible political and electoral reforms that may lead to bringing the elections forward.

It is possible that there will be no honeymoon period either with Congress or with the public, which is why it is important to open a dialogue to advance the electoral process, which will not be in the next three months, but which must take place as soon as possible.

Anyway, to finish, I would say that we are in transition towards our next crisis. I don’t think we are solving the crisis, we are moving towards another.

Marisa Glave

P.S.

• IVP. TUESDAY 13 DECEMBER 2022:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7912>

- Translated by David Fagan from Nueva Sociedad:
<https://nuso.org/articulo/pedrocastillo-peru-boluarte/>

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