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Tensions rise in Peru with winner yet to be announced in polarized election

Peru is entering its fourth day since Sunday's second-round presidential election with no announcement of an official winner and a razor-thin margin between the two candidates, former teachers strike leader Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of a former dictator and leader of the Peruvian right.

As of Wednesday, with 98.5 percent of the ballots counted, Castillo was leading Fujimori by a margin of 50.2 percent to 49.8 percent, or just 67,250 votes out of the 17,420,330 thus far tabulated.

Still being counted are ballots from roughly 1,300 voting tables where one or more votes were challenged for irregularities. It is widely predicted that the official declaration of the election results will not come until the end of the week, if not later.



Supporters of presidential candidate Pedro Castillo gather near a ballot counting site, in Lima, Peru, Tuesday, June 8, 2021. (AP Photo/Martin Mejia)

While the corporate media had virtually anointed Fujimori as the winner based on the first votes counted from the capital of Lima, as votes from the more impoverished areas of the interior came in, Castillo sustained his narrow lead. He proclaimed himself the winner from the balcony of his Lima headquarters Tuesday night, taking off his iconic straw hat, throwing his arm out and declaring, “The people have spoken.” He also claimed that some Latin American governments had already recognized his victory but named no countries.

Fujimori and her party, Fuerza Popular, have made unsubstantiated claims of fraud by Castillo’s supporters in the Peru Libre party. Her vice-presidential running mate, Luis Galarreta, couched these allegations in the kind of rhetoric that has dominated Fuerza Popular’s campaign, declaring “communism knows how to commit fraud” in all the countries “where it takes power.”

A team of attorneys from Lima’s most prominent corporate law firms has been assembled with the mission of nullifying the results from pro-Castillo precincts in the interior based upon unsubstantiated allegations of improper collaboration between election officials and Castillo’s Peru Libre party.

This last-ditch operation follows a sustained propaganda and intimidation campaign by major employers and the corporate media against Castillo. Employers subjected workers to compulsory meetings where they were told to vote for Fujimori and that they would lose their jobs if Castillo won. The media’s propagandizing was so blatant that a dozen journalists resigned from two of the major news shows stating that they had been ordered to slant all coverage in favor of Fujimori.

Meanwhile, supporters of Fujimori called a march for late Wednesday afternoon on the headquarters of the Peruvian Armed Forces Joint Command in the southern Lima neighborhood of Santa Beatriz, with the apparent purpose of appealing to the military to intervene against a Castillo victory.

Earlier in the day, the Defense Ministry issued a statement declaring that the military is “subordinate to the constitutional power” and that “any call for it not to comply with this

mandate is improper for a democracy.” The statement followed the widespread sharing on social media of what was presented as a statement of the Peruvian high command vowing that the military would intervene to save the country from Castillo and “communism.” The military said that the document was a fake.

There has been open talk of a coup in the media. The right-wing novelist and prominent Fujimori supporter Mario Vargas Llosa wrote a column for the Spanish daily *El Pais* after Castillo was the leading candidate in the first round of the election, declaring that if he were to win the second round it would “probably mean a military coup in short order in Peru.”

Leading Peruvian columnist Juan Carlos Tafur, while warning against civilian and military “hotheads” trying to overturn the election, allowed that a “restorationist coup” might be required if Castillo were to take radical measures.

Most blatant was the right-wing daily *Perú21*, which on the eve of the second round carried on its front page the headline “The political risks of communism which is today being irresponsibly promoted.” It featured a large photograph of Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet side-by-side with President Salvador Allende, who was overthrown in the 1973 coup led by the general, ushering in 17 years of dictatorship and bloody repression. The article stated that Allende had “provoked” the coup by seeking to “alter the economic system that then ruled in Chile,” warning that Castillo would do the same in Peru.

While the right wing has grown increasingly belligerent in its threats, Castillo and his supporters have worked to calm “the markets” by disavowing any radical measures. On Monday, after a dramatic fall in the value of Peruvian sol and a sell-off on the financial markets, Castillo issued a statement affirming that as president he would “respect the autonomy of the Central Bank” and guarantee payments on Peru’s crushing foreign debt, now equivalent to roughly 40 percent of the country’s gross domestic product.

He went on to declare, “We reiterate that we have never considered in our economic plan nationalizations, expropriations, confiscation of savings, exchange controls, price controls or import prohibitions.” Instead, he is now calling merely for improved tax collection on corporations and seeking a better deal on royalties from the transnational mining

companies. As far as an agrarian reform, his campaign has also foresworn any expropriation or redistribution of land.

The statement seemed to have had the desired effect, with Peruvian bonds regaining half the value they lost and the stock market rising on Tuesday.

The elections have provided a distorted reflection of the immense social divide that exists in Peru. While wealthier Lima neighborhoods like Miraflores and San Isidro voted between 80 and 90 percent in favor of Fujimori, impoverished regions in the interior like Ayacucho, Cusco and Huancavelica, voted by similar margins for Castillo.

Peruvians have suffered the highest COVID-19 per capita death toll in all of Latin America, and the health care system is in a state of collapse. The country's economy contracted by more than 11 percent last year, wiping out millions of jobs and pushing what is expected to be more than 3 million people into abject poverty and hunger. At the same time, the criminal policies of the government and the employers have sparked strikes by miners, health care workers, public employees and other sectors of the working class.

The fear among the most conscious layers of the Peruvian bourgeoisie and transnational mining, finance and other sectors invested in Peru is not of Castillo, but rather the radicalization and growing militancy among those who voted for him. Their concern is that a Castillo presidency, with its slogan of "No more poor in a rich country" could arouse expectations of change that will not be realized, leading to a social explosion.

The bourgeoisie has already gone through the experience of Ollanta Humala, the former army officer who initiated his presidential campaign in 2006 as a "21st century socialist," only to pack his cabinet with reliable representatives of capitalist interests and carry out repression of workers' struggles.

Kurt Burneo, an ex-deputy finance minister who is now an InterAmerican Development Bank executive in Washington and considered a likely presidential economic adviser to Castillo, told the daily *La Republica*, "When you look at Peruvian history, it is not unusual for someone to campaign from the left and govern from the right."

Such sober assessments from representatives of the bourgeoisie, born of the experience of the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America, are entirely lacking among layers of the pseudo

left, both in the region and in North America and Europe, which have hailed the prospect of a “socialist” president in Peru.

Among the crudest examples of this tendency is the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which sent a delegation to Peru to observe the elections. It issued a statement declaring that “this election lights the way for other Latin American movements that seek revolutionary social change” and that the DSA itself wanted to emulate Castillo’s example.

This promotion of illusions that the way forward for the Latin American working class and oppressed masses lies in some kind of revival of the Pink Tide under the leadership of bourgeois parties like Peru Libre can only help pave the way to new defeats. It is entirely in line with the interests of the US State Department in channeling the upsurge of the Latin American working class behind safe “left” bourgeois governments that can serve only as antechambers of a new wave of military dictatorships.

The struggle in defense of living standards and basic democratic rights can be advanced only on the basis of the political independence of the working class from all bourgeois parties as well as their affiliated corporatist trade unions. A new revolutionary leadership must be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Peru and throughout the region.

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