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Astounding Victory in Peru of Socialist Candidate for President

In voting on June 6, Pedro Castillo, candidate of the Perú Libre (Free Peru) political party, defeated three-time presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori, daughter of imprisoned former president Alberto Fujimori. Five days later, with all votes counted, Castillo claimed a victory margin of 69,546 votes, or 50.2 % of the votes. Keiko Fujimori, who gained 49.8% of all votes, is charging fraud and demanding that 200,000 votes from rural areas be recounted.

Castillo's narrow victory, yet to be officially validated, represents an abrupt shift from Peru's norm of corruption, right-wing ascendancy, and political instability (such that in one week in November 2020, three presidents took office, one after the other.) Castillo's unexpected first-round victory on April 11, with 18.5% of the votes, was unsettling enough to his competitors that almost all of them backed Keiko Fujimori in the recent voting. Each of Peru's two Communist parties backed Castillo (as evidenced here and here).

In office, Castillo will face formidable obstacles: a hostile national press, a Congress that overwhelmingly opposes him, business and financial establishments in panic mode, and retired military figures threatening revolt. Additionally, Peru's total of deaths attributed to climate change is the third highest in Latin America and its rate of deaths due to COVID-19 infection is tops in the world.

Under the auspices of dictator Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), Peru turned to undiluted neoliberalism characterized by foreign profiteering from mining and oil and gas extraction and by privatization of healthcare and education. A long-established rural-urban gulf

widened. Rural disadvantage, affecting Peru's indigenous population in particular, provided the boost accounting for the victory of Pedro Castillo and his party.

The divide separates Lima, with 40% of Peru's population, from rural districts, where Castillo scored overwhelming pluralities, some in the 80-90% range. Political attention to rural life from national centers of power, from Lima, has been sparse. Candidate Fujimori campaigned only fitfully in Peru's countryside.

Pedro Castillo, born in 1969 of illiterate parents, has taught in a rural elementary school since 1995. In 2002, he was an unsuccessful mayoral candidate. Earlier, Castillo had taken a leadership role in autonomous peasant patrols (known as "ronda campesina") responding to thievery and political turmoil. He gained prominence in 2017 for his part in a teachers' strike. He and his family operate a small subsistence farm.

The Perú Libre Party, established in 2012, calls for nationalization of extractive industries, a new constitution, and respect for women's rights, including reproductive rights. It claims to be Marxist, socialist, and anti-imperialist – but not Communist. Campaigning, Castillo called for "No more poor people in a rich country." Keiko Fujimori based her campaign on fear as she associated Castillo with terrorism, communism, and Cuban and Venezuelan socialism. She extolled her father's success in corralling the Shining Path guerrillas.

According to the Party's website, Perú Libre "originates from the provinces, represents Deep Peru, and is committed to people who are most in need ... Perú Libre has governed in the regions and [small] cities ... and firmly defends decentralization ... We are internationalists ... The Party condemns all types of imperialism ... interventionism, and foreign dependency."

Perú Libre calls for the departure of USAID and closure of U.S. military bases. Castillo supports solidarity alliances such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Union of South American Nations.

Vladimir Cerrón, a neurosurgeon educated in Cuba and Peru, founded Perú Libre's predecessor party in 2012. He has served as governor of Junim Province, was briefly a presidential candidate in 2016, and continues as Peru Libre's secretary general. Charged with corruption, Cerrón entered prison in August 2020. A judge annulled the charges against him on June 9, coincident with the election of Pedro Castillo.

Defeated presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori was imprisoned briefly in 2018 on charges of taking bribes from Brazil's Odebrecht corporation to finance her presidential run in 2011. Presently she is under investigation on charges of money-laundering and obstruction of justice. From age 19 on, she served as "first lady" for her father who, having abandoned

his presidency in 2000, is serving a 25-year presidential term on charges of corruption and human rights abuses.

The Perú Libre Party adopted the thinking of José Carlos Mariátegui, founder in 1928 of Peru's Communist Party. Mariátegui endeavored to adapt Marxist thought to the rural and indigenous realities of Latin America. As explained by Gilberto Calil, whose report appears on rebellion.org, Mariátegui held that Peru's elite, concentrated in Lima, despised and oppressed indigenous peoples. The divide was such, according to Mariátegui, that Peru lacked a "national project" and a bourgeois revolution. Only indigenous peoples based on the land were potentially ready to advance social and democratic demands.

Mariátegui insisted that any socialist revolution in Peru and Latin America would have rural and indigenous origins. Accordingly, Calil regards Perú Libre's program as "coherent ... in centering on concrete demands of Peru's rural population: agrarian reform, social rights, education and healthcare."

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