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Protests and coup threats as Peru enters fourth week without certification of presidential vote

Lima was the scene again Saturday of dueling demonstrations between supporters of Pedro Castillo, the former teachers strike leader who won Peru's June 6 second-round election, and those of his right-wing rival Keiko Fujimori, who is trying to overturn the results with baseless allegations of fraud in what has been described as a slow-motion coup.

At Fujimori's rally, right-wing supporters chanted "Peruvians want a new election." Castillo used his rally to issue pledges of loyalty to Peru's existing capitalist order, including a call for the chief of the country's central bank to remain in the position that he has held for the past 15 years. There the crowd chanted "the people united will never be defeated."

Three weeks have passed since Peruvians went to the polls, and election authorities have yet to officially declare the winner. This is despite all of the ballots having been counted, leaving Castillo with 50.125 percent to Keiko Fujimori's 49.875 percent, a slim margin of 44,058 votes.



Pedro Castillo addresses June. 26 rally in Lima (Credit: Andina)

The protracted delay in recognizing Castillo's victory has provoked protests in Peru's mining corridor, where he won overwhelmingly among the impoverished population. Workers erected barricades across roads, halting truck traffic and threatening to paralyze mining operations, the most crucial sector of the Peruvian economy.

Fujimori is the daughter of the former dictator Alberto Fujimori, now imprisoned for crimes against humanity and corruption during his decade-long rule that ended in 2000. If she fails to secure the presidency, she herself faces the prospect of imprisonment on corruption charges relating to the massive bribery and kickback scandal surrounding the activities of the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, in which every living Peruvian ex-president and virtually every political party are implicated.

The Fujimori camp, backed by powerful sections of the Peruvian ruling class and the bulk of the media, has promoted the lie that Castillo's election victory was the result of fraud. With the aim of nullifying 200,000 votes, it mobilized an army of lawyers to file a series of challenges alleging irregularities in election districts in Peru's impoverished Andean and southern region, where Castillo won overwhelmingly.

While the National Electoral Tribunal (JNE) has dismissed the challenges submitted by Fujimori's lawyers as baseless, they are moving ahead with appeals. In a further bid to paralyze the body's deliberation, Luis Arce Córdova, a Fujimori supporter, resigned from the tribunal last Wednesday claiming that he did not want to "validate false constitutional deliberations."

This attempt to deny the JNE a quorum was remedied at the end of last week with Arce's replacement by Víctor Raúl Rodríguez Monteza, a fellow prosecutor who, like Arce, is implicated in a corruption scandal involving the bribing of judges in the port city of Callao.

Among the latest attempts to have the election overturned has been an appeal by the *fujimoristas* to the Organization of American States (OAS) to intervene by conducting an audit of the results. They have specifically cited the 2019 Bolivian election, in which the OAS intervened with baseless claims of fraud. This paved the way for a coup against President Evo Morales, who was forced to resign by the military and was replaced by a right-wing regime.

In all of this there is an element of playing for time by the Fujimori camp with the aim of organizing sufficient forces within the state apparatus to execute an extra-constitutional coup.

This threat was made explicit in a June 14 letter to the high command of the Peruvian armed forces signed by retired senior commanders, including 23 Army generals, 22 Navy admirals and 18 Air Force lieutenant generals (the list was slightly padded with the "signatures" of dead officers). The communique called upon the military to "act rigorously" in order to "remedy" the "demonstrated irregularities" in the handling of the election results in order prevent the coming to power of an "illegal and illegitimate" commander-in-chief.

Among the most revealing episodes in the electoral coup plot is the revelation that Vladimiro Montesinos, Alberto Fujimori's powerful chief adviser and intelligence chief and longtime "asset" of the US Central Intelligence Agency, has played an active role in the attempt to overturn the election results, including by bribing members of the National Electoral Tribunal (JNE).

Montesinos is imprisoned in the maximum security naval prison in Callao, serving sentences for bribery, embezzlement and illegal gun-running, and facing trial on other charges related to massacres, extra-judicial executions and torture carried out on his orders. Nonetheless, it has emerged that he was able to make 17 calls, apparently from the

office of the prison's director, to a right-wing former commando and senior *fujimorista* operative, over the past month.

The substance of these conversations was made public with the release of audiotapes by Fernando Olivera, a center-right politician who first came to prominence in 2000 with his release of the so-called “vladi-videos,” videotapes showing Montesinos handing millions in bribes to political and media figures. The intelligence chief had made the tapes himself to blackmail anyone failing to sufficiently support the Fujimori regime. The release of those tapes played a significant role in the collapse of Fujimori's decade-long dictatorship, with the ex-dictator fleeing to Japan and Montesinos to Venezuela.

In the audiotapes released last week Montesinos is heard telling the retired commando colonel Pedro Rejas Tataje to contact Guillermo Sendón, a political operative sympathetic to Fujimori, indicating that he could facilitate the bribing of three members of the electoral tribunal. In another audiotape, Sendón tells Rejas Tataje that the three JNE members would vote in favor of Fujimori in exchange “tres palos” (three sticks) meaning a million dollars each. Sendón said he had already been in contact with Luis Arce Córdova, the prosecutor who abruptly resigned from the tribunal.

The ability of Montesinos to play an active role in the attempt to overturn the election is incontrovertible evidence of support by elements of the military in the coup plotting.

Also revealing was Montesino's advice to the *fujimorista* operative that he could seek assistance from the US Embassy. The US State Department last week issued a statement praising Peru's election as a “model of democracy in the region,” but never naming Castillo as its victor, clearly leaving Washington's options open. For his part, Montesinos, one of the most sinister figures in recent Latin American history, enjoyed an intimate relationship with the embassy and the CIA dating back to the 1970s, when he supplied Washington confidential intelligence on the bourgeois nationalist military regime of Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado.

In the face of the coup threats and an increasingly hysterical campaign denouncing him as a communist, Pedro Castillo has moved ever further to the right in a bid to win the confidence of the Peruvian ruling class.

This shift was at the heart of the speech he delivered to the mass rally in his support on Saturday. He made the most news by stating he intended to maintain Julio Velarde as president of the Central Reserve Bank of Peru (BCRP). Velarde, a favorite of the International Monetary Fund, is affiliated with the right-wing Christian People's Party, whose ex-president Lourdes Flores is among the most prominent supporters of Fujimori's bid to overturn the election.

"We are not communists, we are democrats, we respect Peruvian governance and institutionalism," Castillo told the crowd. "We are respectful of this Constitution and, in this context, I ask doctor Julio Velarde that his work in the Central Reserve Bank remain permanent. This is necessary not only for economic tranquility, but to open the doors for the big investments that have to be made democratically, with rules." He went on to declare himself "respectful" of the "dignity" and "loyalty to the homeland" of the Peruvian military.

The authoritative big business mouthpiece Bloomberg News declared Castillo's announcement regarding the central bank "the most favorable move for the markets" that he has taken since his election.

International finance capital is taking the measure of Castillo and determining that just like another former union leader turned president, Lula of Brazil, he is a man with whom they can do business.

The hysterical and increasingly dangerous anti-communist campaign within the Peruvian ruling class to overturn the election and revive the Fujimori dictatorship is driven by fear not of Castillo, but of the impoverished layers of the working class, peasantry and urban poor who voted for him. Peru's stark levels of social inequality have been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the country posting the worst per capita death toll in the world and millions driven into unemployment and poverty. Combined with unending corruption scandals that have discredited every political party and state institution, these conditions threaten to ignite a revolutionary explosion.

The Peruvian working class can place no confidence in Castillo and the coterie of right-wing advisers, politicians and corporatist union officials surrounding him to defeat the threat of a coup. Workers must mobilize their political strength independently and on the

basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective of revolutionary struggle. This requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership, a Peruvian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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