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PERU'S REVOLVING DOOR OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Jadon Sargeant



Introduction

The year 2016 was an election year in Peru. Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, commonly abbreviated to PPK, became president by a narrow margin, running for the center-right party Peruvians for Change. However, only 20 percent of Peruvians can identify the president's party. In Peru, politics is a profoundly personal endeavor where parties merely serve as vehicles for candidates to reach office and have short life spans. Peruvians for Change was founded in October 2014, and it is likely that it will suffer the same fate as other political parties and not outlive their leader's political career. The past five presidents have all come from different political parties, and none of them has won reelection. In many cases the party fades away as soon as the president falls out of favor.

In this article, I analyze Peru's political system, shedding light on the compromising effect it has on Peru's democracy as well as possible paths toward establishing a stronger

party system. This unique challenge is a direct result of the presidency of Alberto Fujimori from 1990 to 2000. Viewed as both hero and tyrant, he is a polarizing figure in Peru's past who left in his wake a broken and ineffective political system. Not much has changed since his impeachment and later imprisonment, but the election of 2016 may hold clues that the political tides are finally beginning to change.

Peru's Tumultuous Political History

Typically, when a country has sustained economic growth and limited civil unrest, the government is viewed favorably by its citizens. Not so in Peru. Despite the past 25 years of economic success and relative peace, Transparency International consistently ranks Peru last in Latin America for perception of both how well the government represents the peoples' views and how corrupt it is ("Corruption Perceptions Index: Peru"). In short, Peruvians believe that their government

is failing them and is hopelessly corrupt. How did this public relations nightmare come to be? The current state of government mistrust that is pervasive in Peruvian society today has been shaped by the country's tumultuous political history (Levitsky).

In the early twentieth century, Peru was an ex-Spanish colony trying to sustain a stable democracy while relying on exporting silver and guano to build its economy. The growth was steady until the 1960s, when a democracy's worst fear occurred: General Jaun Velasco staged a military coup and became dictator. General Velasco did not know how to run a nation's economy, and he instituted untested land reform measures and nationalized most of the large mining companies in Peru. These ill-advised actions led to an immediate economic downturn that persisted throughout the series of military takeovers and rigged elections that followed ("Peru Historical...").

In 1980 the Maoist terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso, or the Shining Path, sabotaged the first election in 17 years by burning all the ballots. To achieve its goals, the leader of the Shining Path, Abimael Guzmán, authorized hyper-violent guerrilla warfare tactics (Jasper and Seelke, p. 2). The Shining Path first took up residence in the Andean regions of Peru, where its strict rules and harsh punishments brought much needed stability to the farmers and herders who had lived without any law enforcement since the military revolutions of the 1960s. The Shining Path then began to spread into the capital of Lima, where it sabotaged infrastructure and indiscriminately killed non-supporters. The government gave increasingly unilateral power to its police to combat the Shining Path, including the ability to detain and question anyone without cause. Government efforts were mostly unsuccessful, however, leaving the country in a constant state of fear and turmoil at the start of the 1990 election ("Peru Historical...").

Democracies that have widespread public unrest and national security concerns are uniquely vulnerable to dictatorship (Jasper and Seelke, p. 2). Increasing fear of terrorism and economic distress caused Peruvians to turn to an untested leader whose aspirations they did

not fully understand. Alberto Fujimori was a Japanese-Peruvian university professor who burst onto the political scene in 1990 running on an anti-terrorism campaign. He won the presidency and immediately implemented his "Fujishock" plan, which consisted of a series of free-market reforms to combat the nation's hyperinflation. He also prioritized the defeat of the Shining Path over the rights of Peruvian citizens and granted immense power to his chief of secret police, Vladimiro Montesinos. In 1992 Fujimori's popularity skyrocketed after Guzmán was captured. Riding this wave of support in 1993, Fujimori disbanded the government and re-wrote the constitution ("Peru Historical..."). He asserted that he was making the democracy of Peru stronger, claiming his action was "not a negation of real democracy, but on the contrary... a search for an authentic transformation to assure a legitimate and effective democracy" (as quoted in Smith, p. 236). His reforms seemed to be effective, as Peru's economy became the fastest growing in the world during his presidency, with an annual GDP increase of 12 percent (Brooke). He easily won reelection in 1995 despite accusations of bribery and controlling the media. The Peruvian constitution at that time allowed presidents to have only two terms in office, yet Fujimori ran for a third in 2000, arguing that it would be only his second term under the new constitution. Accounts of gross human rights violations by the secret police began to surface, causing Fujimori to barely win reelection under suspect circumstances. Shortly thereafter, incontrovertible evidence emerged that Fujimori engaged in embezzlement, bribes, and other corrupt practices. He fled to Japan in January 2000 and tried to resign, but Congress impeached him instead. Fujimori stayed in Japan for five years until 2005, when he traveled to Chile in an effort to restart his political career. He was arrested in Chile and extradited to Peru. He was eventually convicted of human rights violations and sentenced to 25 years in prison ("Peru Historical...").

From 2000 to the present, Peru has maintained a weak democracy and stayed the course of Fujimori's macroeconomic policy, continuing the economic growth that began with his presidency (Santos and Werner, p.

19). Fujimori is a deeply controversial figure in Peruvians' minds and the source of most of the distrust of the government. The presidents following Fujimori have not been popular, and the ones before him were military dictators. He is widely believed to have steered the Peruvian economy onto the right track and to have ended the reign of terror of the Shining Path, although his contribution to both accomplishments and the means he used are hotly debated (Horler). He is also remembered for his authoritarian regime and corrupt administration. The only politician who can be plausibly credited with saving the country is currently in prison. Peruvians' cynicism with regard to their government can be attributed to the controversial rise and fall of Fujimori.

Mistrust of politicians has been a barrier to the formation of modern political parties in Peru. Political parties have tended to have short life spans, with the two most common ideologies Fujimorismo and its opposite anti-Fujimorismo. The former ideology is in favor of Fujimori's economic and political tactics, while the latter is fiercely opposed. Although political parties themselves form and disband quickly, these two worldviews are always the focal point of any debate (Levitsky and Cameron, p. 22).

Peru's 2016 Presidential Election

The presidential election of 2016 took place in two phases. First, a vote was held in April to select two finalists from a plethora of candidates running with the support of the diverse political parties in Peru. None other than Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of the now-imprisoned Alberto Fujimori, ran for president and won the first election in April with roughly 40 percent of the vote. Also making it to the run-off election was PPK, a respected financier. Keiko Fujimori ran on the ticket of the Popular Force party and PPK represented the Peruvians for Change party. The two finalists then competed head-to-head in a June run-off election to determine the next president. Keiko Fujimori was ahead in the polls for most of the lead up to the June 5th election date, but PPK narrowly defeated her by the miniscule margin of 50.1 percent to 49.9 percent. This surprising upset of Keiko was attributed to a series of scandals involving the senior members of

her party, including news that Congressman Joaquín Ramírez was under investigation by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for connections to drug trafficking. PPK had repeatedly cautioned the electorate that the corruption and abuses of power associated with Keiko's father's authoritarian reign would return should she be elected. Additionally, a reluctant last-minute endorsement by Verónica Mendoza, the third-place finisher in the first round of elections and champion of the leftist Broad Front party, may have put PPK over the top by helping her voters choose between the conservative candidates. Mendoza told her supporters that PPK was the lesser of two evils, saying, "Only by voting for Kuczynski can we close the path towards Fujimorismo" (as quoted in Wang).

Keiko has reluctantly accepted these results, saying that she was defeated by "promoters of hate" (as quoted in "Peru Elections..."). She promises to continue to work on her political agenda through the legislative branch, where her party controls 73 of the 130 seats in Congress. PPK's party, Peruvians for Change, holds 18 seats (Post). It was founded as recently as October 2014. The few seats that the party holds in Congress indicate that PPK's victory in the presidential election was more due to the strength of the anti-Fujimorismo ideology than the strength of his own party.

Popular Force, the Fujimorismo party, is the closest thing that Peru has to a modern political party. It has existed since the downfall of Alberto Fujimori. Its newfound majority in Congress allows it to make political moves despite its loss in the presidential race (Horler). Seat allocation in Peruvian Congress follows the d'Hondt method for proportional representation, which stipulates that a party must have above five percent support to win any seats in Congress. The result is that most of the seats that would go to the smaller parties are instead allocated to the largest party, in this instance Popular Force (Carey, p. 3). The d'Hondt method has long been criticized for awarding huge seat bonuses to already established parties (Taagepera and Shugart, pp. 86–87). Had Peru employed a directly proportional representation system, Popular

Force would have won 53 seats in Congress, which would be a small plurality. Then PPK could have made alliances with the smaller parties to get the necessary votes to move his economic and social plan forward. Under the current government, if he wants to pass anything through Congress he will have to compromise with Keiko. Some of her more controversial stances and areas where PPK may have to accommodate her are freeing her father from prison, supporting illegal mining in the Amazon, and increasing powers of police in the fringe regions of Peru (Wang).

Importance of Political Parties

Established political parties serve several key functions in a democracy. They help the electorate determine what a candidate's stances are on each issue. Instead of painstakingly learning about each politician, voters can use the party platforms and reputations to decide whom they want to elect. Parties provide a shortcut to voters, who can now feel confident that they know what to expect from any given candidate based on his party affiliations (Dargent and Muñoz, pp. 48–49). In the absence of political parties, becoming an educated voter is infinitely more difficult. Sifting through the often unofficial stances of a plethora of independent or new party candidates is frustrating and inefficient. Voters have no past experiences with a party on which to base their expectations. People may quickly become disillusioned with this political chore and develop pessimistic attitudes toward government in general. This distrust of government is exactly what is observed in Peru.

Another key aspect of political parties is that they make democracy viable for the politicians as well. Politicians' most important goal is to be reelected. This makes them inherently short-sighted with policies, rarely planning beyond the next election cycle. Politicians are especially bad at taking short-term risks for long-term rewards because they might not be around when the investment finally pays off (Tanaka, p. 56). Political parties, on the other hand, last beyond individual elections and thus are better equipped to plan long-term policy. The obvious caveat to this

benefit of political parties is that they must actually last longer than any single politician. The problem in Peru is that parties are so short-lived that they cannot plan future policy any better than politicians.

Parties also provide an avenue for social unrest to be addressed. The two greatest threats to a democracy's stability are a fearful economic elite and an angry worker class. Powerful socioeconomic players do anything to protect their business interests. This means that if their wishes are not effectively represented in the current government, they will turn to other non-democratic alternatives (Levitsky and Cameron, pp. 3-4). They can support military takeovers and appoint figureheads to keep their assets safe. Thus, for example, a strong right-wing party is an important element of a democracy. It provides business owners with a delivery system for their ideas within the existing democracy. Additionally, a strong labor-based party can help protect the rights of the working class. A labor party is able to pass reforms and make workers feel that their government is looking out for them. This alleviates tension and helps prevent extreme actions like strikes and revolutions (Dargent and Muñoz, p. 52).

Another way that political parties protect democracy is by facilitating the system of checks and balances to limit the power of the executive branch. In most countries, the executive branch is the most prone to corruption and authoritarian leanings. The large amount of power consolidated in one individual makes it a common area of democratic deviance. The legislature must fulfill its oversight duty and quickly strike down an action or impeach a president who begins to abuse his power (Levitsky and Cameron, p. 3). The presence of organized and watchful political parties allows the legislature to take action much faster than if it were composed of unorganized and disconnected independents. In case the legislative branch fails, the parties can rally their faithful members and trigger public outcry to combat the executive's actions.

It is also much harder for inexperienced and unqualified politicians to get elected when political parties are strong. Parties serve as gatekeepers to public offices, helping

qualified and vetted politicians get elected. When positions in government are filled by members of established parties, there are fewer opportunities for amateur politicians to be elected. Partisan politicians are not flawless, but outsiders are far more likely to sabotage the democratic process. They often have no training in the rules of government and do not value democratic institutions. They have trouble compromising to form alliances with other policy makers and resort to strong-arm tactics and overt threats (Tanaka, p. 58). These unpredictable leaders are not beholden to any outside organizations and act recklessly. Democracies are much more stable when parties filter the candidates down to those who share their core values, one of which is the preservation of democracy in the first place.

Destruction of Peru's Political Parties

Peru has experienced the danger of political outsiders firsthand. Alberto Fujimori was not a politician, but rather a university professor. The inner workings of government revolve around negotiation and compromise. These are topics that may be foreign to a professor without experience navigating the political system. Fujimori quickly became frustrated when the implementation of his national policy was much harder to enact than he expected ("Peru Historical..."). Having no ties to the system of governance, he had no qualms about voiding the constitution and replacing it with one more suitable for his vision.

Fujimori was not just a symptom of a democracy lacking political parties, but he was also the cause leading to modern parties' difficulty in becoming established today. Early in his presidency, he was extremely popular. The defeat of the Shining Path and the control of hyperinflation made his approval rating rise to 66 percent and earned him some leeway with the people for his unconventional authoritarian style. This early success popularized the idea of independent candidates because Fujimori himself had run as an independent candidate. The Peruvian people began to internalize Fujimori's arguments in favor of amateur politicians. There are several familiar talking points that are brought up any time political outsiders run for office. These often charismatic

candidates usually claim that they are not career politicians; they are simply concerned citizens. They apply their business acumen and fix the discord in government. They are not beholden to any corporate or party interests. These claims are consistently used to great effect by amateur politicians, and Fujimori was no exception. The Peruvian people saw what an effective leader Fujimori was initially, although many of his accomplishments were due to his circumnavigating the democratic process rather than working through it. They then latched onto the mentality that outsiders are preferable to politicians.

The newfound distrust of politicians led to a large-scale exodus from the few political parties of the time. Candidates realized the stigma that was now attached to political parties and sought to re-brand themselves as independents. An example of this was the longtime member of the center-right Christian People's Party, Alberto Andrade, who defected to become an independent in order to run for mayor of Lima in 1995 while famously saying, "No candidate affiliated with a party had a chance of winning the mayoralty of Lima" (as quoted in "Levitsky and Cameron, p. 11"). Andrade's strategy was successful, and he won the election. This laid the blueprint for other politicians, and almost overnight the established political parties melted away. This had the unintended consequence of also destroying any accountability that the legislature could have on Fujimori.

Without parties to unify the Peruvian Congress, its members were uncoordinated and unprepared to act as a check on Fujimori's executive power. The people took notice of this also. Near the end of Fujimori's presidency, as the corruption became more apparent, cries surfaced for the old parties in Congress to take action to curb his power. At this point it was far too late, and the few remaining members loyal to the political establishment were unable to do anything. Fujimori's regime eventually did collapse, but its demise was a self-destruction and had nothing to do with outside resistance. The powerlessness of political parties to stop Fujimori is remembered to this day, and Peruvians do not see political parties as a safeguard to democracy. After Fujimori's

resignation in 2001, an emergency election had to be held to elect a new president. Despite the near collapse of democracy that ensued from the last political outsider they elected, Peruvians chose Alejandro Toledo, an amateur politician who, like Fujimori, had never held public office. The failures of established political channels to stop Fujimori were fresh in the peoples' minds, and another independent seemed preferable. It is this legacy of mistrust that persists today and hinders the establishment of lasting political parties in Peru.

Party-forming Problems and Policies

In countries with established political parties, when a new issue arises (such as an impending war or negotiations with labor unions) the parties gauge the public's opinion and choose sides. But in Peru parties are often based around a single issue and may not take a stance when a new problem presents itself. Sometimes an entirely new party forms with the emerging dispute as its center point. In contrast, the mark of a strong political party is that it can adapt to changing circumstances and persist throughout many elections. In the previous section I enumerated the benefits of strong political parties to a democracy, but what can Peru do to help establish parties? In this section I explain the party-building process and evaluate Peru's available options.

The first issue to contend with is the very real possibility that Peruvian politicians simply do not want more-established parties. The elected officials in power have managed to succeed under the current party-less atmosphere and thus may be comfortable with the status quo. Additionally, many of these politicians founded their own parties as candidate-centered vehicles just before their elections, thus avoiding any oversight that candidates in established parties must contend with. Despite strong parties being beneficial for democracy, these "independents" have little incentive to change the current system (Levitsky and Cameron, p. 8). This paradox of personal benefit versus democratic benefit is exactly what makes parties so important. Parties can see beyond individual rewards to help democracy as a whole.

Assuming that Peru's government is motivated to strengthen parties, how could it make progress? To answer this question, one must first look at the roots of historically strong political parties. Parties typically form in Latin America during times of great division in a country's history. The most powerful and longstanding parties in Colombia, Uruguay, and Costa Rica formed in the midst of civil wars. Similarly, the political parties of Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina became established immediately after changes in voting laws created a large influx of new voters. Finally, social revolutions in Nicaragua and Bolivia resulted in the founding of their parties. Without these dramatic events laying the foundation for political parties, Latin America has seldom seen new parties have long-term success (Dargent and Muñoz, p. 65).

Peru also faces some unique demographic and structural challenges in the formation of a strong party system. The geographic separation between the three regions in Peru (desert, Andes, and Amazon) limits the capability of national parties to meet the needs of each group. Typically, Latin American countries are able to form a strong party based on the working class. Peru has seen no such party form, as the lifestyles and cultures of the people in the three regions are not sufficiently uniform for common interests to bind them together. Also, ongoing citizenship issues with indigenous peoples make all forms of social inclusion difficult, including voting. The indigenous peoples have thus far opted to distance themselves from the greater Peruvian government rather than participate actively in the political system. Appealing to all members of the heterogeneous populace is difficult for a party.

Another obstacle to party-building efforts in Peru is the lack of institutional infrastructure. Before the existence of radio, television, and the Internet, politicians had to organize large-scale networks to communicate with voters (Tanaka, p. 62). They would put a major emphasis on building a geographically based ground game to rally support. With the advent of modern communications systems, politicians no longer need to establish these community engagement networks because

they can communicate through mass media. Independent politicians are enabled by these readily available modes of communication (Dargent and Muñoz, p. 69). Highly structured party machinery is not necessary to reach voters, and there is little incentive to build connections with communities because the party may not survive until the next election. In this way technological advances have actually thwarted progress toward established parties.

The final impediment to strong political parties in Peru is the electoral rules. The current system discourages party formation through a variety of means. In a presidential election, Peruvians directly elect a president by a majority of the popular vote. This is the simplest method of election and ensures that every person's vote counts equally. But it also means that there is no incentive to appeal to people living in rural areas (Jackson and Moselle, p. 68). Most other countries use some form of indirect election, such as an electoral college. Voters choose electors who then vote for the president. Each region of the country is assigned a number of electors, thus forcing candidates to appeal to every region as opposed to just the major population centers. An electoral college incentivizes the creation of inroads into regional communities and prevents the needs of large geographic areas from being ignored. To reach these areas and to win the electoral votes of fringe regions, significant investment into party infrastructure must be made (Jackson and Moselle, p. 73). As it stands now, however, in Peru these areas are mostly ignored, and parties do not need to devote resources to building party roots.

The Peruvian Congress is also elected based on a directly proportional representational system (with a few exceptions). Again, seats in Congress are not awarded to the winners of certain smaller races but are awarded proportionally to parties based on popular vote. In Peru, the people do not directly vote for the seats in Congress but rather vote for a party, which then chooses the politician to take the seat. This system has an effect similar to the direct election of the president in that it discourages reaching out to the fringe areas of Peruvian society and instead rewards parties that focus on population centers.

The aforementioned d'Hondt method of seat allocation means that parties must pass a five-percent threshold to win any seats. The few small parties that have reached out to rural Peru seldom pass the five-percent barrier and therefore do not gain any seats for their efforts. In short, the electoral rules essentially disenfranchise large swaths of Peru and discourage political participation.

Implications of the 2016 Election

Several researchers, such as Harvard's Steven Levitsky and Martín Tanaka of The Catholic University of Peru, published research articles in the early 2000s examining the strange party-less government in post-Fujimori Peru. These researchers evaluated the possible paths toward party establishment and concluded that there are limited opportunities and a bleak outlook. In the 15 years since their writing, Peru has mostly confirmed these predictions insofar as strong parties have yet to form. As a result, Peruvians' satisfaction with democracy is among the lowest in Latin America ("Corruption Perceptions Index: Peru"). Additionally, a survey conducted by the polling agency Americas Barometer gauged citizens' trust in current political parties from 2006 until 2014. Over that eight-year span, trust dropped from 19.4 percent trusting political parties to only 9.95 percent, the second lowest in Latin America (Cohen). This result does not inspire confidence that the political party carousel is nearing an end. However, there are some positives to take from the recent election that may point toward a shift. Verónica Mendoza told her supporters to vote for PPK in a successful effort to prevent Keiko Fujimori from taking office. This is by no means an alliance between these two parties that have very different ideologies, but the fact that it was successful demonstrates an increase in party polarization. Extreme dislike of one party can serve as a stepping stone to coalition building and, eventually, to party establishment. Another sign of progress in Peru is the strength of Verónica Mendoza's Broad Front party. The political left in Peru has never recovered from the atrocities committed by the Shining Path. It has been fighting a stigma ever since and has never had much success in

either presidential or parliamentary elections. Former President Ollanta Humala, from 2011 to 2016, ran on a platform of social inclusion but was also fiscally conservative and expanded free-market protections. Broad Front is the first truly leftist party to win 20 seats or more in Congress since 2000. Most stable party systems in Latin America have successful parties on both ends of the political spectrum. A majority of Peru's political parties have thus far favored the right. A successful leftist party will increase voter satisfaction with the available options and in turn decrease resentment toward the political system (Lozada).

Another indicator of progress from this past election is the percentage of blank or invalid ballots. Invalid votes are those that cannot be counted because of clerical errors on the ballot. In countries with mandatory voting laws, like Peru, invalid ballots are viewed as protest votes and represent dissatisfaction with the choices. Peru has one of the highest rates of invalid ballots in Latin America (Cohen). The rates in Congressional elections and first-round presidential elections have not changed much since 2001, but the invalid ballot rate for the second round of presidential elections has been steadily dropping, from 11.0 percent in 2001 to 5.7 percent in 2016 ("Republic of Peru"). In Latin America, there is a correlation between how strong the party system is and

low numbers of invalid ballots. This increase in party polarization may help change elections in Peru from personally driven to party driven.

Conclusion

The lack of established political parties has not changed much since Fujimori resigned in 2000. The past 15 years have mostly confirmed what many researchers predicted, as strong political parties have not emerged. However, the elections in 2016 did produce a few results that could mean change is coming. The emergence of a purely leftist party that had a strong candidate in the presidential election and that now holds 20 seats in Congress is a first in Peruvian politics. This past election also displayed a new level of polarization as evidenced by Verónica Mendoza's endorsement of PPK because she was so opposed to Keiko Fujimori. This trend of heightened party affiliation is also demonstrated by the sharp decrease of invalid votes in the presidential election. People may be beginning to form stronger opinions about their choices. This is the first step to these parties being able to persist. There are plenty of obstacles to party longevity still in place. Direct elections, a positive view of independents, and citizenship rights issues all pose challenges for party establishment. However, this election is the first in 15 years to offer any hope of change.

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