

# What Does Our Recent Past Tell Us About the Future of Peruvian Democracy?

Written by Italo Beltrão Sposito

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ITALO BELTRÃO SPOSITO, AUG 24 2021

On July 19th, Castillo was declared the winner of the Peruvian 2021 general elections by the National Election Jury, the body responsible for the country's electoral process. It had turbulent electoral aftermath during which his opponent Keiko Fujimori used the already established strategy of far-right candidates by contesting electoral results. Despite finally recognizing her defeat, Fujimori's political history and style show that she will use aggressive tactics to hamper Castillo's conditions to govern. Castillo will face restraints to govern from different sides. First, the opposition will control the Congress, as María del Carmen Alva, from *Acción Popular*, was elected its president with the support of Fujimori's *Fuerza Popular*. Despite a tradition of the presidential party to head the Legislative branch, *Perú Libre* did not form a winning coalition because of internal division and a fragmented congress. The main obstacle was probably Castillo's electoral promise to rewrite the constitution through a Constitutional Assembly, which does not have congressional support, that fears a dissolution.

There are concerns regarding Castillo's first steps as the incumbent and how other political actors are answering. He nominated Guido Bellido as prime minister and chief of his Cabinet, a congressman from the more radical faction of *Perú Libre*. The mainstream media immediately aligned itself with the right. Also, the military has refused to symbolically recognize Castillo as commander-in-chief until he names the new chief of the Armed Forces. Additionally, his popular mandate (and therefore popularity) depends on pushing reforms to please his supporters from Peruvian rural areas. Such reforms should dissatisfy the elite of Lima, which likely will react negatively to his plans to nationalize the strategic sector. Finally, he is close to the Shining Path and has alleged that intends to reform the constitutions.

Despite all these legitimate concerns, throughout this text, I will argue that instead of centering on the presidential behavior, his social and political background, we need to have in mind that the recent political instability in Peru is a systemic problem. To put forward my argument, first, I review studies on presidential breakdowns and democratic erosion, especially the one engaged in explaining Latin American multiparty presidential systems instability. Second, I use those lenses to analyze Castillo's first steps in office and present prospects for Peruvian democracy. I conclude with some brief comments.

### How Can the Lens of Comparative Politics Help Us?

The first consideration to be made is that a coup is virtually impossible, both as Castillo does not have support from the military and regime collapse by coups are now rare. Since the beginning of the third wave of democratization (started at the end of the 1970s), presidential breakdowns (the interruption of presidencies without a regime collapse) substituted coups. They are common in Latin America, especially in South America (Hochstetler and Edwards 2009). Broadly, they have an equivalent principal function to coups as both aim to get rid of unwanted presidents. Causally, bad economic performance, broad protests, and political actors' radicalization enhance their chances of occurrence (Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2016). When presidents lose their legislative shield (congressional majority) (Pérez-Liñán 2007) and their popular support, they are at risk of suffering an impeachment or being forced to resign (Pérez-Liñán 2014).

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That is an essential feature to be considered, as three of Castillo's predecessors had their presidencies interrupted. The elected president, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK), resigned after a corruption scandal. His vice, Martín Vizcarra, distanced himself from the president during the crisis while adopting an anti-corruption rhetoric to attain popular support. He was later impeached by a declaration of "moral incapacity" with the support of 105 congressional votes (being 87 of 130 the minimum required). That was the second congressional attempt to dismiss the president. After a first victory, Vizcarra had hardened the tone against Congress. He accused it of manipulating audios to falsely accuse him of corruption and stage a coup against him. Vizcarra was dismissed despite public reactions against the legislative, a corrupt institution barring anti-corruption initiatives in the public's eyes. As the successor was a congressman (Manuel Merino), he faced heavy pressure from the streets and resigned after a few days in office. pressure from the streets and resigned after a few days in office.

Like this recent turmoil in Peru, cases of repeated breakdowns occurred in different South American countries. In Ecuador, four presidents were ousted from 1997 to 2005 during a period of institutional malfunctioning. Reforms originally conceived to strengthen presidents' policymaking abilities and curb incentives for corruption, in practice, blocked the formation of political coalitions, paving the way for instability (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich 2010). In Argentina, during the convertibility crisis, three presidents did not finish their mandates. Fernando de la Rúa and Rodríguez resigned, while Eduardo Duhalde agreed to advance elections to avoid further political turmoil. Finally, in Bolivia, between 2003 and 2006, Sánchez Lozada, Carlos Mesa, and Rodríguez Veltzé resigned during a period of high intensity and generalized protests regarding the gas nationalization policy (Buitrago 2010).

In all these countries, the aftermaths were similar. Presidents faced polarization and aggressive opposition since their inauguration. The previous unstable political context that prevented other presidents from finishing their mandates influenced their decisions to control other branches. These cases guard some differences, especially in Argentina where, despite interferences in the Central Bank, Judiciary branch (Helmke 2017), and Media by the Kirchners (Repoll 2010), institutions were relatively unharmed (Levitsky y Murillo 2008). Despite this, all used strategies often present during the ongoing third autocratization wave (started in 1994) (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). They may be classified as hegemonic leaders that threatened democracies from the inside (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Alizada et al. 2021) by concentrating power in the executive at the expense of the courts and the legislature, leading to the erosion of horizontal accountability (Coppedge 2017). These 'incumbents legally access power and then gradually, but substantially, undermined democratic norms without abolishing key democratic institutions' (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1105).

As in Latin America, presidents' unilateral behavior to change constitutions to extend control over other branches are a particular risk for democracy (Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt, and Vairo 2019) this is a valid concern regarding Castillo. Some political groups interpreted the designation of Bellido as part of a plan to provoke Congress to deny the prime minister a vote of confidence. That would force the president to name a new cabinet and kicking off conditions for a congressional dissolution (allowed in the Peruvian Constitution after two votes of no confidence from Congress).

As Castillo doesn't have a congressional majority and, therefore, a legislative shield, we should expect that he will need to rely on popular support to maintain the office. That was not the case for the Kirchners and Evo Morales, but Rafael Correa. The Ecuadorian president also did not have a congressional majority. Therefore, rather than relying upon his predecessors' failed strategies of forming 'ghost coalitions,' he did not allow any of his party members to run for Congress, calculating that he would never achieve a majoritarian position. Alternatively, he profited his high approval rates to undermine the Congress legitimacy (very unpopular by then) and push forward his proposal of holding a referendum on the election of a constituent assembly. Correa's principal objective when aggrandizing his presidential powers could be to avoid the same destiny as his predecessors (Bermeo 2016). Therefore, 'Correa's decision to convoke a constituent assembly and dissolve the opposition-controlled legislature arose in good part from his fear of being removed.' As 'the president had no representatives in Congress, and executive-legislative relations quickly deteriorated into a struggle over which branch would survive' (Helmke 2017, 123-24), he used this strategy to strengthen his presidential power and secure office. That reduced cooperation incentives for legislators demobilized the legislative opposition (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich 2010) and consequently hampered Ecuadorian democracy.

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While impeachments serve to remove corrupt or hegemonic presidents (e.g., Alberto Fujimori), when oppositions use them for political reasons, they might harm democracies and deepen polarization (Carey et al. 2020). Using such instruments should only have a positive institutional impact when legally motivated and proceeded (del Tronco and Gorostiaga Guggiari 2020). While removing presidents that violate democratic principles should bring institutional strengthening, undemocratic behavior from the opposition may disrupt the rules of the game, turning an impeachment more dangerous than maintaining the president (Marsteintredet 2013). As anterior cases have shown, deliberately overthrowing presidents might drop citizens' level of satisfaction with democracy, creating the conditions for the rise of hegemonic leaders.

We should be especially concerned as Peru is going through a period of polarization. During such, partisan interests might prevail over democratic principles, with ordinary people being tacit (and sometimes explicit) grantors of autocratic leaders (Svolik 2019). Indeed, recent democratic backsliding derives from polarization. It results from the growing use of rage discourse and nationalist ideologies (Lührmann et al. 2018, 2019), the latter present in the second round of Peruvian elections.

## The Following Steps Might Lead the Way to Path Dependence

As Castillo does not have a legislative majority, he will need to rely on popular support to stay in office. While that might mean pushing his reformist agenda, he does not necessarily need to do so by overpassing Congress. The polarization highlights that a portion of the electorate only voted for Castillo in rejection of Fujimori. This electorate could be satisfied with moderate reforms.

The elected president himself reassured that the nationalization of strategic sectors would respect private investments. He nominated Pedro Francke to head the Ministry of Economy, who met with investment banks to assure the government's commitment to economic stability. Additionally, Julio Velarde, Peruvian central bank chief, in the job since 2006 and regarded as a guarantor of the country's financial stability, accepted Castillo's invitation to stay in the post.

Initially, Congress responded to Castillo's prime minister nomination by inviting Bellido to discuss, rather than immediately rejecting him. That moderate reaction is probably because of the recent Vizcarra legislature dissolution and signals congressional initial unwillingness to confront the president and further damage its image with public opinion. The desire from political elites to leave the recent political turmoil behind and avoid strengthening the outsider might help stabilize the country.

Additionally, Castillo's decisions regarding the economic nominees show that he is concerned about guaranteeing support from economic elites to enhance his governability, somewhat like did Lula in Brazil. Also, the elected president patiently waited for his nomination, delayed due to his opponent unwilling to accept her defeat.

Alternatively, Keiko Fujimori, who will probably lead the opposition to the Castillo government, has shown the most undemocratic behavior when alleging fraud in the elections (discarded by electoral authorities). She was also behind the political scandal that motivated the impeachment trial against PPK, not approved in Congress but motivated his resignation. As the opposition leader during the political crisis when different presidents fell, she used controversial political manoeuvres to hamper their conditions to govern.

If polarization will rise and if the political crisis endures, that will depend on the next steps from the president and the opposition, especially Fujimori. On the one side, the recent political turmoil with repeated presidential breakdowns, the ongoing processes of democratic erosion, and other examples from Latin America points out that the main concern should be Castillo. On the other, an aggressive opposition from political and economic elites and media conglomerates might also be a risk for democracy, as have occurred in the impeachments of Rouseff in Brazil and Lugo in Paraguay.

The president appears to have left his electoral rhetoric behind, but there are still several doubts. His intend to nationalize strategic sectors was a policy that won in the ballots. It is, therefore, legitimate. His cabinet nomination

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sent mixed signals, and the president of his party is willing to go far to create the constitutional assembly. Castillo holds the pen to make the most significant institutional damage but, so far, has the benefit of the doubt.

Alternatively, Keiko is the political actor with the most undemocratic behavior in the recent past. She does not have the benefit of the doubt. Despite accepting her defeat, she promised to mobilize her supporters against Castillo and called the elections illegitimate.

## Keeping an Eye on Fujimori

Instead of prematurely pointing the finger at Castillo, we should be concerned with Keiko Fujimori. The favorite candidate of the Peruvian elite and mainstream media has a problematic past. Beyond extolling the legacy of her father and being involved in numerous corruption scandals, she has undermined precedent governments.

While Castillo has the incentive to leave elections behind and focus on achieving the political conditions to govern, Fujimori does not have anything else interesting on her plate besides attacking her adversary. Her next steps need to be closely watched. All in all, we should hope neither will prefer to escalate instead of seeking consensus, something unlikely considering the ongoing polarization.

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