

Peruvian elections: for the Right or the Right? - “Despite the election upset, the opposition will not be silenced”

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Despite the election upset, the opposition will not be silenced, writes Stephanie Boyd.

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A few evenings ago in San Francisco, a woman from Peru’s Andean highlands stood before hundreds of elegantly dressed people in simple farming clothes and sang the ballad of her struggle against the US-owned Newmont Mining corporation [1]. At the end, she received a standing ovation. Her name is Maxima Acuña and she was receiving the prestigious Goldman Award for environmental defenders.

In 2011, Acuña refused to sell her farm to the company blocking their proposed Congas Mine expansion project. Since then she has faced persecution from Peruvian police and armed forces. She and her daughter have been beaten, her home has been burned down, crops destroyed and animals murdered. In a devious move, the mining company sued her for squatting on her own farm. Maxima lost the case even though she has legal title to the land, but with help from a local environmental group appealed the sentence and won.

The Newmont mining company’s permits for Congas have expired and the company recently published a statement saying ‘under the current social and political environment, the Company does not anticipate being able to develop [the] Conga [mine] for the foreseeable future.’

But with a \$4.8-billion goldmine at stake, neither the government nor company is likely to give up easily, and Maxima continues to face threats and harassment.

Luckily, she is not alone. Across Peru the quiet peasant farmer has become a symbol of resistance. Her image is painted on murals and printed on posters and banners held aloft during protest marches. The northern state of Cajamarca where she lives also stands behind her struggle. In 2012 the state governor declared a general strike against the project and the national government responded by placing the region under a state of emergency. On the first day of the ‘emergency’, police killed five protesters and brutally assaulted a Catholic priest, Father Marco Arana, who was sitting peacefully on a park bench at the time of the attack.

Left divided

Two years later voters re-elected the same state governor, Gregorio Santos, despite charges of corruption. Santos' defenders say he is the victim of a political witch hunt and even those who believe he is guilty admit he has not been treated fairly. The governor has been in jail for nearly two years without trial - prosecutors say they are still conducting their investigation and refuse to release Santos, even denying his petition for house arrest.

This year 'Goyo', as Santos is called by affectionate fans, made headlines by running for president from his cell. On 9 April he won the state of Cajamarca and took nearly four per cent of the national vote - enough to have put Veronika Mendoza, the candidate for a coalition of leftwing parties, in second spot. Mendoza finished a close third to rightwing candidate Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, a staunch defender of neoliberalism. Social networks were rife with angry criticism of Santos in the wake of the results, accusing him of stealing the coalition's votes and dividing the Left. The governor published a tweet in his defence, saying it was 'their own fault' the coalition lost, 'because they didn't have enough strength to reach the population. It's not our fault.'

Political analyst Mirko Lauer pointed out another invisible factor in the election results: nearly 32 per cent of eligible voters spoiled their ballots or didn't vote. This is a large number in a country where voting is mandatory and non-voters must pay a hefty fine. Nearly a third of the population rejected all the candidates and inadvertently gave the rightwing a boost.

There were also accusations of fraud against Peru's electoral body. Two high-ranking candidates on the Right were barred from running just a few weeks before the vote for campaign infractions, helping consolidate the rightwing vote.

Old cronies

Whatever forces are to blame for the Left's defeat, Peruvians must now choose between Kuczynski and Keiko Fujimori in a run-off election this June.

Yes, for those who recognize the name, Keiko is the daughter of disgraced former president Alberto Fujimori. Papa Fujimori is currently serving 25 years in prison for human rights abuses, including directing a death squad, and corruption. During those dark years Keiko served as her father's First Lady and continues to defend her father. Keiko's party is teeming with Dad's old cronies; like zombies from a third-rate horror movie, Peru's corrupt politicians never die. Both Kuczynski and Keiko are likely to back the Congas project and Keiko's party has already won a majority of seats in the Congress.

Like zombies from a third-rate horror movie, Peru's corrupt politicians never die. Despite the grim results, Peru's newly formed leftwing coalition - called Frente Amplio (Broad Front) - won 20 seats and will form the official opposition for the first time in over two decades. Victorious Congress members include Marisa Glave, an ardent feminist and gay rights activist, and Indira Huilca, daughter of union leader Pedro Huilca, who was assassinated during Alberto Fujimori's regime. The government blamed Huilca's murder on Maoist guerrillas, but there is considerable evidence that an elite death squad managed by Fujimori was responsible for his murder.

Indira, who witnessed her father's murder when she was a child, is firmly convinced of Alberto Fujimori's guilt. Not surprisingly, she has vowed never to vote for Keiko. But she also criticizes

Kuczynski for refusing to negotiate with the Left. 'I think his team is very comfortable with Fujimori's party,' she said in a radio interview, calling on him to 'take a stand on labour issues and for human rights.'

When the new Congress is sworn in at the end of July, Indira will face off against Fujimori's son Kenji, who won a seat with his sister's party. Kenji gained notoriety during the scandal that toppled his father's government. Secret videos were broadcast on national television showing business and political elites receiving bribes from the Fujimori government. But Kenji's videos were of a different nature: shocked viewers watched him have sexual relations with his dog Puñete (Fist) and play with a military helicopter as though it were his personal toy.

The fact that Kenji and Indira were both elected shows the depths of the polarization of Peruvian society.

Opposition rising

Maria Elena Foronda, another Goldman prize winner and devoted environmentalist, also won a Congress seat for the alliance. I interviewed Maria Elena for a *New Internationalist* article in 1999 about her struggle [2] to clean up the fishmeal industry in her community and was awed by her dedication and bravery. At the end of a three-day visit to the city that literally rained fishmeal, my lungs begged for mercy and throat burned with an acrid, fishy taste. To this day I am still humbled by Maria Elena's determination to remain in such difficult surroundings, braving threats and persecution on top of the pervasive contamination.

Peru is full of Maria Elena Forondas and Maxima Acuña. Whoever wins the presidency in June will have to deal with a growing sector of civil society that is fed up with the current economic model. Throughout Peru, communities are rising in opposition to the sale of their natural resources to foreign companies without environmental controls or fair distribution of the profits.

Although Peru's general poverty levels have been halved in the past 15 years, the gap between cities and the countryside - where most of the resources are located - is growing. Rural poverty is at 46 per cent and in Maxima's state of Cajamarca, home to South America's largest goldmine, poverty stands at 50.7 per cent.

The right will also have to contend with a new political force: the 'No Keiko' movement. More than 50,000 people took to the streets of Lima, the nation's capital, to rally against Keiko a few days before voting this April. Parallel marches and rallies were held in cities throughout the country and also in Europe and other Latin American countries.

Crying 'Fujimori, Never Again' [3], protesters dressed up as Fuji-Rats or carried posters remembering the ex-president's many abuses. A group of young women carried signs declaring they were daughters of the peasant farmers Fujimori couldn't sterilize. His government has been accused of forcibly sterilizing thousands of indigenous and low-income women (read a report on this in the forthcoming June 2016 issue of *New Internationalist*).

Many of the protesters, like these young daughters, were too young to remember the years of Papa Fujimori. I wondered what drew so many youth to the march and asked a group of students from Lima's elite Catholic University.

'A lot of [Fujimori's] crimes still have not been resolved,' said a young woman majoring in sociology. 'For us, these crimes are not in the past; they're in the present. They're our reality.'

'There are some very illuminating videos about [Alberto] Fujimori on YouTube,' said another young man, while his companions shook their heads in agreement and said Facebook and Twitter helped get young people out to the marches.

But perhaps the best answer came from a student who carried a sign saying, 'We're young, but we're not stupid.'

They may have lost at the polls, but these students, farmers, indigenous leaders, activists and disgruntled ordinary citizens will all be watching Peru's new government. With heroines like Maxima Acuña and Congress members like Indira Huilca and Maria Elena Foronda, they will not be silenced.

Stephanie Boyd

P.S.

* <http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2016/04/20/peru-elections-opposition/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/Fujinuncamas>

[2] ESSF (article 37766), [It rains fishmeal - Jailed for ecology in Chimbote, on Peru's stark desert coastline.](#)

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/Fujinuncamas>