

Disillusion with Candidates Clouds Peruvian Elections

A year ago, Peru entered a political crisis with the re-election of President Alberto Fujimori to a third term. Domestic and international observers called the elections a fraud, and in the series of scandals that followed Fujimori's top advisor and intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, was implicated in a whole range of abuses. The crisis culminated with Fujimori's resignation in November.

With the collapse of the Fujimori regime, the political establishment also crumbled. As a result, according to Steven Levitsky and Cynthia Sanborn-affiliated with Harvard University and Lima's Universidad del Pacífico, respectively-"political parties were replaced by personalistic movements and inexperienced outsiders running as candidates."

In the middle of this scenario appeared former president Alan García, who expressed regret for the mistakes of his past government and announced his intention to run for office again. García has struggled to regain credibility and shed the stigma of the corruption and economic problems that plagued the country during his presidency. He made it to the second round of voting, where he will face frontrunner Alejandro Toledo.

With the final vote approaching on June 3, Peru does not seem any closer to emerging from its political crisis, despite the best efforts of interim president Valentín Paniagua. The election campaign has been characterized by the absence of serious discussion of strategy and ideas. In a recent televised debate seen as a decisive forum for swaying undecided voters, Toledo and García spent most of the time trading accusations of alleged cocaine use and secret bank accounts.

The negative campaigning has only increased voters' cynicism. As Clifford Krauss of the New York Times points out, any chance for real debate about the country's future has been overshadowed by questions about whether García took lithium for depression and if Toledo really abandoned an daughter born out of wedlock or used cocaine. At this point, Levitsky and Sanborn note, a large sector of public opinion believes that "a vote for Toledo is a shot in the dark and a vote for García is a vote for impunity."

Peruvian journalist Jaime Bayly complains that deciding between Toledo and García "is like choosing between the electric chair and the gas chamber." Along with Alvaro Vargas Llosa, a fellow journalist and former Toledo campaign advisor, Bayly has called on voters to leave their ballots blank to protest the selection of candidates.

Voting in Peru is mandatory, but the mutual recriminations that have characterized the campaign have caused even the candidates' supporters to wonder how to vote on June 3. Polls show Toledo leading García by almost 15 points, but at the same

time 34% of those responding said they wouldn't vote for either one of the candidates; which is to say, a third of voters plan to cast a blank vote.

At a crucial moment in Peru's efforts to recover from a decade of corruption and authoritarianism, the leading candidates for president have been unable to seize the initiative for political change or restore hope in the country's democratic future. Democracy in Peru is weak; it will take strong institutions and leadership to reinforce it, and at the moment, Peru has neither.

See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/19/world/19PERU.html>