PERU

The Center Could Not Hold

by Tomás Bril-Mascarenhas

Why would a country vote for political change after a decade of dramatic economic growth? Since 2002, Peru has been one of Latin America's most impressive economic "miracles," its GDP growing by around 9 percent in three of the last four years. When Peruvians went to the polls to choose their new president in April 2011, most analysts expected a status quo electoral result ratifying the economic policies of the Alejandro Toledo and Alan García administrations. Surprisingly, however, none of the three candidates backed by Lima's economic and political establishment made it to the second round. Instead, Ollanta Humala, a former military officer who has long been associated with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and was widely

Billboard featuring a magazine cover announcing the upcoming face-off between Ollanta Humala and Keiko Fujimori.
(Photo by Catherine Binet, The Advocacy Peace Project Fellow, 2011.)

perceived as the most economically heterodox of the competing candidates, faced off against Keiko Fujimori, daughter of former strongman Alberto Fujimori and the candidate of the far right. In June 2011, Humala was elected president with 51 percent of the national vote.

Peru's unexpected electoral results have much to do with the remarkable weakness of its state and its political parties, argued Steven Levitsky, a Berkeley-trained professor of Government at Harvard University who has produced path-breaking research on party politics and political institutions. During his CLAS-sponsored talk, Levitsky traced the links between Humala's rise to power and the peculiar nature of Peruvian democracy.

Two decades ago, partly as a result of Alberto Fujimori's 1992 self-coup, the Peruvian party system collapsed. Within a short period of time, traditional parties became electorally irrelevant, opening a space for the emergence of numerous outsiders with little or no political experience. Party identities evaporated, and the political process came to be dominated by personalities with no significant institutional or organizational backing. The result, according to Levitsky, has been elections characterized by high levels of fragmentation and volatility. Under these circumstances, a wide range of outcomes is possible.

The 2011 presidential elections were no exception. None of the five major candidates represented an established party. In a country with stronger parties, the three candidates who supported the continuity of the economic model — Pedro Kuczynski, Alejandro Toledo and Luis Castañeda — would probably have belonged to the same party or would have been more likely to reach an agreement guaranteeing the access of one of them to the second round. The result of this lack of coordination was that the pro-status quo vote split three ways, paving the way for a second-round vote between Ollanta Humala and Keiko Fujimori.

The Lima elite thus faced their worst nightmare, an unimaginable outcome when the race started: having to choose "between AIDS and cancer," as Nobel Prize-winning author Mario Vargas Llosa bluntly put it. Eventually, according to Levitsky, Humala was more successful than Fujimori in moderating his discourse to reach the center of the political spectrum, forming a winning coalition that combined a radical protest vote (concentrated in the interior of the country) with a middle-class, anti-Fujimori vote (concentrated in Lima and the coast). Despite the steady economic growth that marked Peru's neoliberal years, its citizens chose to turn to the candidate that was furthest away from economic orthodoxy.

But the puzzling rise of Humala to the presidency is not just an outcome of the volatile, fragmented and hyper-personalized pattern of political competition that typically emerges after the collapse of party systems. Rather, Levitsky underscored that Peru's "surprising left turn" is also a product of the remarkable weakness and ineffectiveness of the country's state and bureaucracy — the Peruvian *estado* is anemic and incapable even by Latin American standards.

>>

Photo courtesy of Presidencia Perú.

President Humala mingles with the crowd after announcing the launch of Pensión 65, a program benefiting the elderly poor.

Many analysts have seen the meteoric rise of Humala, a leader whose faith in democracy has been questioned, as a new piece of evidence attesting to Peruvians' preference for caudillos or pure authoritarianism. Levitsky argued convincingly that this cultural explanation is not backed by the facts. Latinobarometer 2010 data show that 61 percent of respondents in Peru agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, a figure that equals the mean for the whole region and surpasses that of Mexico and Brazil. When asked about the desirability of having a president who controls the media or bypasses laws, parliament and institutions during difficult times in order to resolve problems, Peruvians clearly lean toward the most pro-democratic pole — responses in Brazil, Chile and in the region as a whole are on average less emphatic about the need to check the power of the executive.

What really distinguishes Peru from its Latin American neighbors is not an authoritarian political culture but, rather, extraordinarily high levels of discontent with democratic institutions. The Latinobarometer survey shows that only 28 percent of Peruvians are satisfied with democracy, well below the regional mean (44 percent) and the percentages of satisfaction in Argentina (49), Brazil (49) and Chile (56). Moreover, Peruvians have by far the lowest levels of trust in congress, the judiciary and political parties.

So, where does this discontent come from? Why do Peru's scores of satisfaction with democracy rank at the very bottom in Latin America, despite the fact that the country's economic performance ranks at the very top? For Levitsky, "this discontent is rooted in state weakness," that is, in the inability of state institutions to carry out basic tasks, such as collecting taxes, building roads, implementing social programs, providing public security and enforcing the rule of law. "When a state is weak, it is almost impossible for a government to govern well, no matter how honest or how well intentioned it may be," he added.

According to Levitsky, the Peruvian state remains one of the weakest in Latin America, especially in the highlands, where the presence of state authority remains minimal. "The rich can live with an ineffective state: they have got private schools, private hospitals, private security, and they have friends to help them with problems in the state bureaucracy." The poor have none

of these options available. "This is crucial," said Levitsky. "State weakness generates widespread perception of government corruption, unfairness, ineffectiveness and neglect. Where these perceptions persist over time, voters are very likely to conclude that all political parties are the same, that all politicians are corrupt, that no one in the political elite represents them."

It was precisely in the regions where the Peruvian state is most absent that Humala found his core constituency. His was an electoral victory that began in the periphery, where citizens feel most abandoned, and ended up penetrating the center. The message flowing down from Peru's highlands in 2011 was clear: rising income is not enough to improve the quality of people's lives if the state apparatus is so skeletal that it cannot deliver basic public goods.

During his first 100 days in government, Humala has started to change a Peruvian tradition: instead of breaking campaign promises just after taking office as did Fujimori, Toledo and García, Humala "is doing exactly what he said he was going to do," said Levitsky. The new government increased the minimum wage and expanded Juntos, the conditional cash transfer program. It also launched a series of new programs, including Pensión 65, which benefits the elderly living in poverty, as well as childcare programs for working parents, assistance programs for low-income elementary-school students and scholarships for those attending university.

What should we expect during the coming Humala years? It is probably too soon to tell, especially in a country as volatile as Peru. What is at stake, however, beyond the day-to-day politics of Humala's presidency, is the future of democracy in Peru. It remains to be seen whether Humala and his successors will find a way to overcome the country's long-lasting weaknesses in party institutions and state capacity in order to create a democracy that meets the expectations of its citizens.

Steven Levitsky is a professor of Government at Harvard University. He spoke for CLAS on November 7, 2011.

Tomás Bril-Mascarenhas is a Ph.D. student in the Charles & Louise Travers Department of Political Science at UC Berkeley.

Levitsky became famous during the second round of the election for saying, "We may have doubts about Humala, but we have proof about Keiko." A student at an anti-Keiko Fujimori rally agrees.

Photo courtesy of Steven Levitsky.