FOURTH PSG WEBINAR ADDRESSED THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS IN PERU

Nov 15, 2020

The fourth in our series of webinars discussing the major issues in Peru today was programmed to tackle the question of the longer-term consequences of the Covid-19 crisis – for bad but possibly also for good. But little did we know in planning this that the panellists would be facing quite such a major political earthquake. With only five days' notice, we had to ask our panellists to rethink and address more immediate concerns. The webinar took place before the protests and killings on the evening of 14 November which led to the resignation of most of the newly-appointed cabinet. But it did consider the highly precarious position facing the Merino government.

The panellists included:

Francisco Durand: Sociologist and senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Catholic University (PUCP), Lima

Maritza Paredes: Director of the Doctoral Degree Programme in Sociology at the Catholic University (PUCP) and president of the PUCP's Centre for Social Science Research

Javier Torres: Anthropologist, journalist and editor of La Mula

The moderator was Natalia Sobrevilla: Steering committee member of the PSG and Professor of Latin American History at the University of Kent.

Natalia began by explaining that the webinar would focus on analysis of current events and their significance. For some background see the analysis in this article. The situation on the ground in Peru was still far from clear and the Constitutional Tribunal was due to rule on 18 November on whether the Congress had made a valid decision. The new cabinet had just been announced. Should the CT rule against the impeachment, it is unclear who would become president.

The first question posed was 'why the earthquake?'. The analysis focussed on the coalition of special interests that created the surprisingly large majority to bring down President Vizcarra. In this coalition corruption played a major role. Half of those supporting his impeachment are currently under investigation for corruption, with many cases arising from the Lava Jato scandal and the variety of construction projects linked to it. But also, there were interests which defended private universities affected by the government's reform programme. Another big issue was the threat posed to key financial and business interests by the planned private pension reform. The fact that there is no re-election in Peru was stressed as a particular reason to make members of Congress interested in action now despite the coming elections in April. There was much speculation that the Congress would seek to postpone

the elections and maintain itself in office beyond next July. Congress has already started on steps to prevent university and pension reform and to promote the weakening of environmental controls.89

Then came the issue of the public response. Overwhelmingly, this involved the mobilisation of young people, mainly between the ages of 18 and 25 and middle class in composition with a strong presence of feminist and environmental pressure groups. It was not a protest involving the old-style left. Rather it was a new and exciting phenomenon, leading at least one panellist to proclaim himself profoundly optimistic about a real democratic opening. The force of police repression was itself providing a strong political education. However, those on the streets lack political experience and need to find common cause. As with the opposition to labour reforms some years ago, mobilisation was taking place on a neighbourhood basis, promoting a democratic political culture, but without clear leadership or a precise agenda.

The theme of optimism was fed by the sense that the model born with the Fujimori decade in the 1990s was in crisis and would give birth to something better. Since that time, the business elite centred on CONFIEP (the confederation of private sector interest groups) has exercised undue influence. One panellist referred to this as the “república empresarial”. Business organisations and lobbyists had effectively exercised control over the finance ministry and other key offices of state such as the central bank. Economic legislation had been conducted overwhelmingly by decree, bypassing democratic scrutiny through Congress. While the fall of Fujimori in 2000 had produced democratic change, the neoliberal model had lived on. We may be on the cusp of a change of direction, it was suggested.

Merino’s cabinet is very conservative and largely inexperienced[1]. It confronts a wave of popular indignation about the penetration of corruption into most aspects of public life. This had been further exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic which showed the weakness of the state in protecting ordinary people and ensuring their basic necessities. The notion of a ‘national interest’ was palpably lacking with the hollowing out of state capacities by private interests.

What now? The situation in Peru is pivotal, and international support is crucial; it can be highly productive. The British Embassy’s statement was good and useful. The PSG was encouraged to continue its informational role. There also needs to be work in support of popular mobilisation to help channel political action in constructive ways. A centre-left coalition could now make headway. But in the very short term, things would be unstable and messy. It was suggested that there might be a ‘constitutional convention’ if the CT finds the impeachment cannot stand.

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1 As mentioned above the cabinet resigned the following day; Merino resigned on 16 November.

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