PSG WEBINAR 5: 'TOWARDS ELECTIONS'
29 November, 2020

The fifth PSG webinar on 28 November 2020 tackled the crucial question of how and why change does, or does not, come about through the workings of the political system. It also dealt with the prospects for next year's elections.

The panellists were:
Martin Tanaka: Researcher at the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos and Lecturer in Social Studies at the Catholic University (PUCP), Lima. Member of the high-level commission appointed in 2018 to identify reforms to the political and electoral systems.

Carlos Monge: Advisor for the Natural Resource Governance Institute and senior researcher for Peru's Centre for the Study and Promotion of Development, Desco. He works on extractive sector transparency issues with numerous civil society organisations.

Indira Huilca: Sociologist at San Marcos University, and former member of Congress for the Nuevo Perú grouping.

The moderator was John Crabtree: Chair of the Peru Support Group; research associate at the Oxford University Latin American Centre, and specialist in Andean politics.

The panel first considered the current political situation. After the confusion of the last two weeks of November, it had been hoped that there would now be a degree of stability running up to the elections. But there are growing doubts as to whether this is the case.

- The first interim president, Manuel Merino, did not help himself by appointing someone as prime minister who is deeply conservative and out of touch.
- 90% of people were reported in an Ipsos poll to consider the impeachment of Vizcarra something that should not have happened.
- Now the new interim president, Francisco Sagasti, has rightly taken steps on police reform and corruption, only to encounter opposition from Congress, which, the panel considered, appears to have learnt nothing from the crisis.
- Sagasti is there because he was (briefly) head of Congress: it would only take a two-thirds vote to remove him from office and he would then automatically cease to be president.

The present situation can only be described as unstable.

The further element is the massive mobilisation in Lima and elsewhere. This began with large numbers of mainly young people, and grew into a much wider base. The initial mobilising theme was the illegitimacy of Vizcarra's impeachment, but other issues were swiftly taken up: above all, human rights and protests against policing methods. The movement lacked structure, but groups formed within it (eg women's groups, youth brigades). The mobilisation was extraordinary for its size and vigour and remarkable for its willingness to take on the forces of order. This led to tough repression and two tragic deaths.

The discussion continued with a series of questions:

Why did Congress change its position on impeachment? The Congress we are dealing with is one with weak parties (or no parties), dominated by individualism and self-interest, characterised by extremes of opportunism and showing a total lack of discipline. These characteristics provide the answer.

Why has it been so difficult to achieve political reform? Following the fall of Alberto Fujimori, there was a genuine move to achieve political reform. But the drive got lost in the following years. Reform would have meant a more institutional path being followed in which personal interests would have been side-lined. But such interests prevailed. The booming economy created a fiction that all was well and there was no need to take on difficult questions of political reform. However, some progress was made under Vizcarra, who created the high-level commission to consider political reform in which one of our panellists took part. Proposals regarding party funding and registration were adopted.

Why has the role of the Left been so feeble in recent years? The panel focused on the Left's difficulty in uniting around a sensible agenda, and in figuring out and creating the right institutional base from which to do politics. With the decline in old-style organised labour, the left has struggled to shape a new agenda around rights, and to create an institutional base that is not dependent on a *caudillo* figure. Meanwhile the populace has become deeply distrustful of individuals. An institutional solution is needed.

Prospects for the elections? There are interesting new developments. On the right a clearly populist authoritarian option now has space, while Vizcarra has opened the door for a more liberal project to establish itself, one that is pro-market but more progressive in its social values – eg women's rights, gay rights etc. The Left has problems of defining its agenda and building an institutional base. It also has a purist streak and will need to become more pragmatic to have any chance of building support.

Where do Amazonian indigenous interests find a home? In the past, the Frente Amplio did work creatively with AIDESEP on territorial rights, *consulta previa* and other such issues. Two of our panellists were actively involved in this. But the Frente Amplio has lost ground over the impeachment issue (it supported Vizcarra's impeachment). On the right, Hernando De Soto has taken up the issue of indigenous property rights. His agenda is potentially dangerous: one panellist argued that if the dialogue is one where the community more vigorously takes up its rights, government will play a lesser role and this could help companies take a stronger position vis-a-vis the communities. On the right, only De Soto has taken this line; most candidates do not concern themselves with indigenous issues. Our previous webinar discussions showed the crucial importance of indigenous rights.