The PSG Annual Conference 2021
Date: 25 November 2021
Time: 1500-1700 GMT

'Peru Today: Turmoil or Transition' Politics and Anti-Politics in Pedro Castillo's Peru

The online conference involved two sessions, both moderated by Vanessa Baird, associate editor with New Internationalist and member of the PSG Management Committee. The first session, entitled 'Politics and Anti-Politics in Pedro Castillo's Peru' discussed the difficulties – if not collapse – of the Peruvian party system, and how the current difficulties are shaping what the present government can achieve.

The panellists were Natalia Sobrevilla, professor of Latin American history at the University of Kent and member of the PSG Management Committee, and John Crabtree, political scientist at Oxford University and chair of the PSG. They discussed this year's surprising presidential election result, in which a hitherto unknown candidate from the left, Pedro Castillo, a schoolteacher and union leader from Cajamarca, ended up just beating a perennial conservative candidate, Keiko Fujimori.

A key point made in the panel was the widespread alienation from conventional politics, not just among the population in general but particularly youth. There is widespread cynicism about the workings of democratic institutions, especially in protecting the interests of the vast majority of its citizens in this highly unequal country. The recently published LAPOP survey conducted across Latin America puts Peru as the most 'dissatisfied' of all countries with democracy, second only to Haiti. The 2021 Latinobarómetro also survey showed that 86% of those interviewed considered that politics in Peru today serves the powerful and only 11% thought it was for the people as a whole.

The business elite is 'reeling' from the loss of its traditional role of political ownership created in recent years, we were told. The lack of linkage between 'the people' and traditional political parties is central here. On the other side, the 'hard' left is now roundly critical of the government for its vacillating stand. The president – Pedro Castillo – who did not expect to win, came into office with no solid team or experience, and has had to build from the ground up. After its first 100 days in office, the government still lacks a clear sense of direction.

Another difficulty has been the Covid-19 pandemic. In relation to this, the panel focused on the way the virus has exposed the defects of the state, and the health system in particular.

The sense of disappointment fuelled by this analysis of difficulties was echoed in the second session entitled 'What does Peru's new government mean for the environment, indigenous peoples and human rights defenders?' The panellists, joining from Peru, were Rocío Silva Santisteban and Teresita Antazú. Rocio Silva is a writer, professor at the Catholic University and former congresswoman for the Frente Amplio (2020-2021). Teresita Antazú is on the governing committee of the indigenous community of Yanesha and is the first female board member of the national indigenous organisation AIDESEP.

This panel delved further into the expectations raised and the difficulties facing the Castillo government. There were positives: progress in health provision, especially vaccines, and Castillo's proximity to ordinary people. A former schoolteacher and member of the rondero movement, he has developed this identification by widespread travelling outside of Lima.

However, he is facing opposition both from the left, within and without the government, and from the far right. The panellists considered that the government's policies so far lack focus and coherence. Teresita Antazú said that indigenous groups, who had had high hopes of this president,

did not feel understood or supported. The lack of a clear vision made it hard for them to follow what the government's policies were meant to achieve.

The conference finished on a more positive note by highlighting the work of indigenous women in defending their rights and territory, their Pachamama (mother earth). A short film was shown telling of the Kukama women's ground-breaking legal action demanding that the state recognise the River Marañon as a living being. The film can be found here. A recording of the webinar is available here.