

6-12-1998

Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori Replaces Key Cabinet Ministers

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori Replaces Key Cabinet Ministers." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12515>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori Replaces Key Cabinet Ministers

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Peru

Published: 1998-06-12

President Alberto Fujimori has made two important changes in his Cabinet, replacing Prime Minister Alberto Pandolfi and Economy Minister Jorge Camet. More changes may be on the way. The resignations surprised most political observers, who are debating whether the changes are part of a calculated plan by Fujimori to improve his authoritarian image and undercut his opposition before trying for a third term.

Peruvian Cabinet ministers traditionally offer their resignations near the end-of-July Fiestas Patrias holidays. Pandolfi's decision came, however, almost two months before that date. His resignation precipitated the pro forma resignations of the rest of the Cabinet to allow Fujimori to form a new team. The president initially ratified the other 14 ministers in their positions, so Camet's resignation the following day was another surprise. Pandolfi gave no reason for his June 4 resignation. He was one of Fujimori's closest allies and staunchest defenders.

The president's statement accepting the resignation also gave no explanation. Pandolfi said in a recent interview that he was willing to stay in his post as long as Fujimori wanted him. His change of plan, plus the lack of public explanation, seemed to indicate that Fujimori asked Pandolfi to step down. Many press reports speculated that Pandolfi was asked to resign because of problems in the Instituto de Defensa Civil (INDECI), the agency responsible for responding to natural disasters, most recently those caused by El Niño weather phenomenon. Gen. Homero Nureña, former head of INDECI, was fired in March after irregularities were discovered in contract awards by the agency for disaster prevention.

The general apparently had been using his post to benefit businesses belonging to his friends. New prime minister vows to "democratize" government Fujimori quickly appointed Javier Valle Riestra as new prime minister. If Pandolfi's resignation surprised most political observers, Valle Riestra's appointment did so even more. Valle Riestra was once a senator for the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) of former president Alan García (1985-1990). He left APRA because of differences with García. The new prime minister is an outspoken lawyer, a persuasive politician, and political enemy of Lima mayor Alberto Andrade, at this point Fujimori's only serious political rival if he runs for re-election.

Valle Riestra immediately set off a controversy by expressing his opposition to a re-election bid by the president. "We must 'de-monarchize' power," said Valle Riestra. "This does not mean I am Fujimori's enemy but that I am the enemy of re-election." Critics said Valle Riestra's appointment and the quick public stance against re-election was a Fujimori-orchestrated move to distract his opponents and improve his negative image, especially regarding human rights and democracy. Opposition Deputy Javier Diez Canseco of the Izquierda Unida (IU) called the appointment

"surprising and dangerous," because "he says he does not believe in re-election, but he is joining a Cabinet that is unconstitutionally heading for a third term in 2000."

The appointment may also undermine the Frente Civico de Concertacion, a coalition comprising political and retired military leaders recently formed to stop Fujimori's re-election. "It's a very sophisticated way of quashing the criticisms (of a re-election)," said political analyst Francisco Sagasti. "This could very well be an elaborate smokescreen." While the political opposition distrusts both Valle Riestra and the government's motives in naming him, pro-government sectors also are uneasy with the appointment, fearing he might really put up obstacles to their efforts to keep Fujimori in power.

Some analysts said the appointment indicates Fujimori's need for a skillful communicator, like Valle Riestra, to defend government policies. Others point to Valle Riestra's rigid defense of strict adherence to the terms of the Rio de Janeiro Protocol signed by Peru and Ecuador in 1942. The border dispute has been in a lengthy negotiation process aimed at resolving the 50-year conflict (see NotiSur, 12/05/98 and 01/23/98). Some opponents see Valle Riestra as a "democratization facade" to counter the international community's persistent accusations that Peru seriously violates human rights and constitutional norms.

Valle Riestra is seen as an important piece in the government's political chess game, with his history of defending human rights and constitutional order. He was a member of Congress when Fujimori dissolved the body in his April 5, 1992, "self-coup." Within days of his appointment, Valle Riestra outlined an ambitious course of action, including constitutional changes to improve Peru's flawed democracy. He said if he was not able to accomplish his goals within 90 days, he would resign. "It is not necessary to violate human rights and the Constitution to govern," said the new prime minister. In a poll published June 9 by the firm Analistas y Consultores, 48.5% of respondents oppose Valle Riestra's appointment, while 34.5% approve and 17% have no opinion. Of those who oppose the appointment, 32.5% gave as their reason that he "is self-serving and an opportunist," 20% said he "does not have a well-defined political line and changes his position easily," and the remainder said "the government is using him."

The majority of those who approved of the appointment cited his political experience, while the rest saw as positive his positions distinct from those of the government and "his democratic ideas." Cabinet also has new economy minister Before Peruvians had time to digest the change in prime ministers, they also had a new economy minister. On June 5, the government announced that Fujimori had accepted the resignation of Jorge Camet and replaced him with Jorge Baca Campodonico. The longest-serving member of Fujimori's Cabinet, 70-year-old Camet had headed the Economy Ministry for five years. In the past, he talked of leaving because of health problems, but said Fujimori convinced him to stay. Camet instituted the administration's largely successful economic policies and structural reforms that cut inflation and brought steady growth. He also refinanced Peru's foreign debt under the guidelines of the Brady Plan, improving Peru's standing with the international financial community.

But many Peruvians complained that the much publicized successes did little to reduce poverty and unemployment. Baca Campodonico has headed the Superintendencia Nacional de Administracion

Tributaria (SUNAT) and also severed as one of the central bank's seven directors. International investors praised Baca for increasing tax revenues, but SUNAT has been criticized by opposition parties and some business leaders for allegedly targeting firms for political reasons. After the appointment, pro-government deputies in Congress said the Economy Ministry would not become "politicized" under Baca's leadership. Opposition questions appointments Deputy Henry Pease of the Union Por el Peru (UPP), the major opposition force in Congress, called the appointments simply cosmetic changes by Fujimori in response to growing discontent among the people.

The changes could be a desperate attempt by Fujimori to stem the tide of protests that have been spreading because of the high unemployment and rising poverty levels. Anti- government demonstrations have been frequent, and university students have instigated marches to support democratic institutions and to denounce what they call the government's disregard for the state of law. One such demonstration was going on outside the building where Valle Riestra was taking his oath of office. On June 11, teachers called a 24-hour strike demanding better pay, guaranteed free education, and adherence to democratic principles. The average teacher's salary is US\$150 per month, and the Sindicato Unitario de la Educacion Peruana (SUTEP) is demanding that the basic monthly salary be raised to US\$705. [Sources: Associated Press, CNN, 06/04/98; Reuters, 06/04/98, 06/05/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 06/06/98; Spanish news service EFE, 06/05/98, 06/09/98, 06/10/98; Notimex, 06/04/98, 06/05/98, 06/09/98, 06/11/98]

-- End --