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National Strike Challenges Policies of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori

by LADB Staff

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Tens of thousands of Peruvians marched in cities across the country on April 28 in a 24-hour strike that tangled traffic and closed many businesses. It was the first national strike against President Alberto Fujimori in his nine years in office. In recent years, economic growth has stagnated and even the upper classes complain about Fujimori's policies.

Discontent not only stems from low salaries but from a loss in buying power in recent years. Privatizations of state enterprises have left tens of thousands of people without jobs. Much foreign investment has gone into industries that do not employ large numbers of people. Retailers and manufacturers have been hit by the recession and have laid off more workers.

Fujimori's economic reforms halted the hyperinflation that soared above 7000% in 1990, the year he took office, and the economy grew by 32% between 1993 and 1996. But one of every two Peruvians still lives in poverty.

The strike was called by the Confederacion General de Trabajadores del Peru (CGTP), with the support of 180 other labor and civic organizations and opposition political parties. An important group of industrialists, who have always backed Fujimori, also supported the strike. "The government has to be aware of the people's discontent," said Emilio Navarro, head of the Sociedad Nacional de Industrias. "The recession that began last year has been getting worse and has intensified in the first months of this year."

The widespread discontent caused by the economic recession and opposition to a possible third term for Fujimori convinced the CGTP that the atmosphere was right for a strike. Nevertheless, unions have lost much of their former influence through the liberalization of the labor market, and only about 10% of Peruvians workers now belong to a union. CGTP president Juan Jose Gorriti said labor's awareness that it could not bring off a strike by itself brought the decision to broaden the effort to a "civic" action.

A statement by strike organizers said that Fujimori's presidency has been characterized by constant violations of human rights, trampling on the Constitution, and interfering with other branches of government and institutions. It said corruption and impunity are the order of the day. Strikers demanded that Fujimori not run for another term in the 2000 elections. They also called for a change in the government's neoliberal economic policies, more jobs, higher wages, social programs to respond to the needs of the poor, decentralization of state resources, transparency and an end to corruption in government, and policies to deal with the economic recession.

Fujimori labeled the strike organizers communists, and Labor Minister Pedro Flores declared the strike illegal. "Only those who have full wallets have the luxury of not working," Flores said. Strike called partial success The night before the strike, hundreds of people gathered for an all-night vigil in front of the Palacio de Gobierno. On the day of the strike, several confrontations between police and strikers occurred. About 75 people were arrested in Lima and several were injured. Public transportation was severely hampered in most major cities. Demonstrators blocked major thoroughfares with rocks and tires and were dispersed by anti-riot police. Most schools and universities were affected. In many hospitals, medical personnel attended emergency patients only.

Lima mayor Alberto Andrade, who leads the polls among potential candidates for next year's presidential election, joined the strike and led thousands in the march on the presidential palace. "This reminds me of the strikes in the late 1970s when workers and business leaders joined together to drive the military regime from power," said political scientist Fernando Rospigliosi. "Something similar is happening now."

While the strike did not bring the country to a halt, despite polls showing that the majority of the population supported its objectives, it did show significant opposition to Fujimori. In separate press conferences following the strike, the CGTP called the strike a success and said it was observed by a majority of people in most of the country. Government authorities, however, said participation was minimal.

Independent analysts called the strike a partial success, with greater support in the provinces than in Lima. "In general terms, this is the most important strike in Peru in almost 10 years," said Carlos Fernandez, president of the Sociedad Peruana de Ciencias Politicas. "Protest is increasing and the government should evaluate this tendency with all due calm and objectivity." Opposition Deputy Henry Pease of the Union por Peru (UPP) said, "This strike has ended the passivity of Fujimori's opponents."

Political effects demonstrate government concern

On April 30, the government said it would ask that criminal charges be brought against the mayors who supported the strike and would call for firing teachers who participated. The Ministry of Education said 40% of teachers did not show up for work. When the government declared the strike illegal, it said anyone who missed work would have their pay docked. Although it dismissed strikers' complaints, on May 3, the administration announced measures to benefit small, medium, and microbusinesses.

Economy Minister Victor Joy Way said in the coming days he will propose changes in the Ley de Contrataciones y Adquisiciones del Estado to sanction state firms that do not give preference in their purchases to small and medium-sized businesses, called pymes. Peruvian laws considers a microbusiness one with less than 12 workers, a small business one with between 12 and 80 workers, and medium-sized businesses ones with between 80 and 250 workers. In Peru, where the informal economy predominates, pymes account for 40% of GDP and employ 75% of the economically active population (EAP).

Re-election still a question

Fujimori has not said that he plans to run in April 2000, but his backers in Congress have approved a controversial law paving the way for such a bid. But the president's declining support was evident not only in the strike but also in the polls, where he has dropped to third place.

In a poll published May 3 by Compania Peruana de Investigation de Mercados (CPI), 20.7% of respondents said they would vote for Fujimori, while 35.7% favored Andrade, and 23% favored Luis Castaneda Lossio, the former head of social security. In the poll, 50.1% of respondents disapproved of the job Fujimori is doing, while 41.3% approved. [Sources: CNN, 04/27-29/99; Associated Press, 04/28/99, 04/29/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/22/99, 04/27/99, 04/30/99; Spanish news service EFE, 04/24/99, 04/27-29/99, 05/03/99; Notimex, 04/23/99, 04/27/99, 04/30/99, 05/04/99; The Miami Herald, 05/04/99]

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