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Fujimori Leads Crowded Field of Undeclared Candidates for Peru's 2000 Election

by Guest

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[The following article by Lucien O. Chauvin is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the Nov. 22, 1999, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori says he has not decided whether to seek a third term in 2000, but if he does he will be the candidate to beat. Fujimori is enjoying his highest approval ratings in recent years, with support inching toward 50%. Pollsters are split on whether he would win re-election on a first ballot, but a recent survey by Apoyo indicated he would win in either a first or second round of balloting.

A survey by Datum in Lima, where one-third of Peru's voters live, gave the president a 38% approval rating, twice that of Lima Mayor Alberto Andrade and 20 points more than Luis Castaneda Lossio. Andrade and Castaneda Lossio, who is best known for turning around the country's inefficient social security agency in the early 1990s, are the principal opposition candidates.

Alejandro Toledo, who also ran for president in 1995, is a distant fourth with 7%, according to the Datum poll. Toledo and Andrade are the only declared candidates. Castaneda Lossio has yet to make his candidacy official, although he is expected to run. Fujimori says he will not decide until late December or early January. Candidates must register with the National Elections Board by Jan. 10. Fujimori himself is likely to be a major campaign issue since he has made controversial moves throughout his time in office.

In August 1990, only a few days into his first term, he broke his pledge not to impose a severe economic adjustment. While the measures he imposed brought inflation down from 7,000% in 1990 to 5% today, the downside has included high unemployment and the collapse of many local industries. In the first six months of 1999, more than 800 medium-size firms filed for bankruptcy, and the country has been in recession since 1997.

Castaneda Lossio and Andrade differ little from Fujimori on basic economic principles, but they promise to make jobs a priority. Andrade has pledged to lower business taxes, and Castaneda Lossio has vaguely promised to take advantage of "synergies" between the public and private sectors. A second major accomplishment of Fujimori's administration was the defeat of guerrilla groups, beginning in 1992 with the arrests of the leaders of Sendero Luminoso and the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA).

While the groups still carry out sporadic attacks, they no longer pose a real threat. Many of the harsh anti-terrorism laws credited with giving the government the upper hand came in 1992, when

Fujimori closed Congress and the judicial branch. A new constitution, approved in 1993, allowed for presidential re-election. Fujimori ran again in 1995, winning more than 60% of the votes cast. Immediately afterward, Congress, dominated by the president's supporters, passed legislation allowing Fujimori to run for a third consecutive term, arguing that he was elected only once under the 1993 Constitution. Andrade and Castaneda Lossio say a Fujimori candidacy in 2000 would be unconstitutional. A third important legacy of Fujimori's tenure is the peace agreement signed with neighboring Ecuador in October 1998, which ended more than 50 years of border tensions and periodic bloody conflicts (see NotiSur, 1999-10-30).

If Fujimori decides to run again, he is most likely to focus on the future and the past, particularly the defeat of inflation and terrorism, downplaying the present, with its recession and negligible economic growth. A June decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which ordered retrials for four Chilean MRTA members, put terrorism back in the headlines. The court said the Chileans had been improperly tried in a military court and convicted of treason. Andrade and Castaneda Lossio objected to the government's subsequent decision to withdraw from the court's jurisdiction, leading government-controlled media to portray them as soft on terrorism (see NotiSur, 1999-07-09, 1999-10-15).

The two likely opposition candidates have accused the administration of dirty tricks in media coverage. A number of inexpensive tabloid newspapers have been waging battle daily against Andrade and Castaneda Lossio. While owned by different companies, the papers tend to carry similar articles with nearly identical quotes from "anonymous" sources, leading opposition candidates to claim government manipulation.

Former employees of one tabloid recently claimed the government channeled as much as US \$160,000 a month to the publication, a charge the publisher denied. Another press-related conflict revolves around a shady group known as the Asociacion Pro Defensa de la Verdad (Aprodev), whose Web site reproduces articles published in the tabloids, which include scandalous accusations against opposition figures and journalists.

Aprodev is run by an Argentine, Hector Faisal, a self-described astrologer and psychic. Although Faisal claims no ties to the government, local newspapers found proof that he stayed at a military base when he first arrived in Peru, as well as phone records showing that he called the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (SIN) offices several times a day. Accusations of excesses by the SIN have plagued Fujimori's administrations.

The president recently said that the role of the intelligence service might have to be evaluated in the future. On Nov. 3, the US Senate passed a nonbinding resolution criticizing "erosion of the independence of the judicial and electoral powers" in Peru, as well as intimidation of journalists. Whether or not Fujimori runs, observers say the administration is greasing the wheels for a governing-party candidate through a nationwide publicity campaign. Throughout the country, particularly in poor urban areas, huge billboards proclaim, "Peru: Country with a Future."

Critics have also charged that government aid money is being used to encourage electoral support. Recent Cabinet changes, especially the naming of lawyer Efrain Goldenberg as finance minister,

are also interpreted as a prelude to political battle. And newly appointed Justice Minister Alberto Bustamante, in an apparent attempt to deflect international criticism over Peru's withdrawal from the IACHR's jurisdiction, has taken a more conciliatory approach, saying the government seeks an amicable solution to pending cases.

Andrade and Castaneda Lossio seem indecisive, spending much of their time complaining about government dirty tricks. While the accusations may be true, and probably have contributed to falling poll numbers, particularly for Andrade, neither he nor Castaneda Lossio has presented a strong proposal for guiding Peru into the 21st century.

The pre-election picture is complicated by the number of potential candidates. Besides Castaneda Lossio, Andrade, and Toledo, as many as seven other hopefuls may split the anti- Fujimori vote. If Fujimori does decide to run, he will need to win in the first round of voting, or at least come close. To win on the first ballot, a candidate must receive 50% of the valid votes plus one. Otherwise, the election will go to a second round between the two top candidates. Although alliances may not form before the April 9 election, they would certainly flourish in a second round, making it more difficult for Fujimori to retain his lead. So far, only the Apoyo poll has given the president enough votes to carry a runoff.

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