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Opposition Objects to Third Term for Peruvian President Fujimori

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 January 6, 2000, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

Outside Peru's National Election Board office, former United Left Sen. Ricardo Letts called on protesters to cross police lines and break down the board's bronze doors. While Letts was whipping up protesting union members, students and retirees on Dec. 29, representatives of the Lima Bar Association were inside, presenting their official protest against President Alberto Fujimori's decision to seek a third consecutive term.

Two days earlier, Fujimori had announced that he would run again to protect the country from what he called an "improvised and neopopulist" opposition. The president's decision was widely criticized by opposition parties, and the election board received 18 petitions to reject his candidacy. Opponents maintain that Fujimori's candidacy violates Article 112 of the Peruvian Constitution, which permits only one consecutive re-election.

The president's supporters argue that while he has been in office since 1990, he was elected only once under the current constitution, so he can run again (see NotiSur, 1998-02-20). On Dec. 31, the election board agreed.

Although the opposition is united in considering a third term unconstitutional, this common ground was not enough to unite them behind a single candidate. When Peruvians go to the polls on April 9, they will choose from among 11 presidential candidates, ranging from Fujimori, who is running on the Peru 2000 ticket, to Ezequiel Atacusi, the leader of an enigmatic religious group that adheres to Old Testament teachings.

Fujimori's principal challengers are Lima Mayor Alberto Andrade, economist Alejandro Toledo, and Luis Castaneda Lossio, former head of the country's social security institute. One potential dark horse is Federico Salas, mayor of the highland city of Huancavelica. Recent polls show Fujimori leading his principal rivals by 12 to 20 points. The president's public support increased throughout 1999, from a low of 18% early in the year to about 40% today. That improvement came despite one of the worst recessions in Peru's recent history, with unemployment climbing into double digits by the end of the year.

An estimated 5% of workers in the manufacturing sector in Lima, the capital, lost their jobs in December alone. Many political analysts and organizations, particularly a coalition of university student groups, believe the opposition made a serious mistake by failing to field a consensus
candidate. Giovanna Penaflor, head of the Imasen polling firm, said opposition candidates have erred in betting on a runoff in which they can unite against Fujimori. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the votes in April, a runoff will be held between the two top contenders. "The president's numbers have been going up for months. If the trend continues, there might not be a second round," Penaflor said.

Student leaders of the National Youth Front oppose both Fujimori’s candidacy and the opposition candidates’ decision to run separately. "If the opposition can't get together, then they shouldn't participate in the electoral process, which is fraudulent and illegal. They will lose to Fujimori, and his unconstitutional government will gain legitimacy," youth front coordinator Juan Paz Espinoza said.

More than 4,000 people, including members of the student groups, demonstrated Jan. 6 in Lima against Fujimori's candidacy. Protests were also held in other Peruvian cities. The run for a third term is not the opposition candidates' only complaint. They say the government, through the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (SIN), is carrying out a smear campaign against all the president's rivals, pointing out that the country's many inexpensive tabloids carry similar banner headlines every day, attacking the opposition.

Questions have also been raised about Fujimori's use of state funds for his campaign. The president says he will continue to inaugurate public works projects and visit cities throughout the country, because that is his job as president. In the first 11 months of 1999, the government spent US$62 million on advertising to promote its programs and policies. Government TV advertising increased by 52% between 1997 and 1999, according to Transparency, an independent election-monitoring group.

The government is now the country's largest advertiser, surpassing Peru's breweries as the top spender. Transparency's general secretary, Rafael Roncagliolo, said that while elections in Peru "have never been a parlor dance, this race will be the most unequal in history." Andrade said his campaign "recognizes that the state apparatus is very strong and we will have serious problems ensuring transparent elections, but we are still going to participate with the idea that we can win."

Transparency has also said the country's voter rolls are obsolete and inaccurate. In a spot check of 1,000 names, Transparency found that 8.4% did not exist. An estimated 346,000 dead people are still registered as voters, according to Transparency's preliminary reports. The opposition claims that state spending on advertising, the president's frequent trips, and the problems with the voter list are evidence that Fujimori will try to win at all costs. Fujimori's supporters, meanwhile, say the fuss is not about democracy, but about opposition candidates' fears that they cannot beat the president. Rep. Jorge Trelles, a member of Fujimori's party in Congress, said voters should have the final word. "If the people don't like the president," he said, "they'll send him packing."

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