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Attempt in Peru to Recall Lima Mayor Susana Villarán Fails

by Elsa Chanduví Jaña

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Nineteen months after taking office, Susana Villarán, the first woman elected mayor of Lima by popular vote, has recently begun to notice a slight uptick in her approval ratings. In June, her approval rating was 30%, five percentage points higher than in May, according to polling firm Datum.

Villarán won the Lima mayoral post in the 2010 elections (NotiSur, Jan. 28, 2011), heading the Fuerza Social party, and her victory unleashed great expectations because it was the first time in almost three decades that the left had captured the mayoralty of the Peruvian capital.

Since taking office, the mayor, a moderate leftist, has had to govern with strong opposition from the right and the media, which were determined to unseat her through a recall that they tried to include in the Consulta Popular de Revocatoria de Autoridades Regionales y Municipales 2012, scheduled for Sept. 30. Their argument: Villarán's administration is inefficient.

Carlos Vidal—in charge of the signature forms purchased for the attempt to remove the mayor from office—and lawyer Marco Tulio Gutiérrez, a former employee of the Municipalidad Metropolitana de Lima during the administration of ex-mayor Luis Castañeda Lossio, along with the former mayor, are the principal backers of the recall effort.

Recall supporters, organized in the Comité Promotor Ciudadano—made up of 125 neighborhood organizations—needed to collect 400,000 signatures, which had to be certified by the Registro Nacional de Identificación y Estado Civil (RENIEC) to then officially file the request for the recall vote with the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones (JNE) by May 25. However, RENIEC certified the validity of only 196,249 of the 456,424 signatures presented by the group, not enough to initiate a recall process this year.

The more than 260,000 signatures declared invalid were found to correspond to dead persons, minors, unregistered identification documents, names that did not match the number on the national identification document, persons who lived in other cities, and other anomalies.

The Ley de Participación Ciudadana stipulates that a recall can occur only in the second or third year of the mayoral term (2012 and 2013); therefore, those who want to invoke a recall of Villarán can still try again next year, the head of RENIEC Jorge Luis Yrrivarren told the press.

"There is too much inefficiency in the mayor's office, so the recall will happen no matter what," Gutiérrez said in an interview with Radio Programas del Perú (RPP).

Former mayor Castañeda, of Solidaridad Nacional, told RPP that his party has nothing to do with the recall of Villarán, but "if it has not gone forward, it cannot continue with what has not begun. I can surmise that there will be three more years of total and absolute inefficiency."

Juan Manuel Velarde, the legal representative of Fuerza Social, told La República that an investigation is pending into the financing of the recall effort. He said that, in some televised
statements, Vidal said that the recall process against Villarán was financed by some 40 large and medium-sized businesses, but he did not specify which ones.

"Those statements are important because it should be made clear whether there were interest groups that had previously been interested donors," deputy mayor Eduardo Zegarra told La República.

A different administration

Early this year, Villarán said that it is not true that her administration is inefficient, and one proof is that the budget execution in her first year in office was better than Castañeda's at the beginning of his two terms in office. She added that the budgetary implementation level of 77.7% could have been better if she had resorted to outsourcing public works, as her predecessor did.

"They want to damage me [with the recall], but the damage is to Lima. The recall is a legal mechanism, and they have every right to use it. But who loses? It is a year and a half of absolute instability, chaos," Villarán said in January to the Andina news agency.

But 67% of Lima citizens disapprove of the mayor's performance, down three points from May, according to Datum. The highest disapproval ratings come from the lowest socioeconomic sector, 72% of whom disapprove, and the youngest citizens. Seven of every 10 Lima residents between the ages of 18 and 24 disapprove of her performance.

Political analysts say that the population expected that Villarán, like Castañeda and other mayors, would "have public works to show" and leave her name on them. During his two terms, Castañeda built sports facilities, stairways, streets, and plazas, which now carry the placard "Lucho did it." But Villarán's governing style is different.

To begin with, the mayor decided to not put her name up where public resources were used. Analysts say that must have an influence on the population, which, in not seeing her name, does not associate her with the public works being done. Added to that was the municipality's poor communication strategy during Villarán's first year in office, which has begun to improve in recent months.

But most important was Villarán's decision to tackle two of Lima's major problems, citizen security and reorganizing vehicular control, precisely the problems not dealt with by previous city governments in Lima. Although she had to choose, her priority was to bring order to transportation, since citizen security has a national competency and is not just a municipal issue. Besides, President Ollanta Humala has already taken the initiative by putting himself at the head of the national citizen-security council (Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadanía).

This does not mean that Villarán has set aside smaller projects but rather that she has prioritized recovering public spaces, spaces for family playgrounds, and gathering places for Lima citizens such as museums and theaters. She has made it her priority to improve the quality of life of the more than 8 million Lima residents.

Villarán has a participatory governing style. In an interview with La Primera, the mayor said she plans to govern using a participatory budget for 2013—50 million soles (approximately US$19 million)—for 83 projects, presented by neighborhood organizations, that deal with the environment, urban development, transport, citizen security, and human, social, and economic development.
Although opinions regarding major aspects of the mayor's work have improved, such as reorganizing vehicle control, which had a 40% negative rating in June, down from 65% in January, or maintaining street and sidewalk construction, Villarán still has many problems to deal with.

Some 53% of Metropolitan Lima citizens rate the administration's efforts at crime control as bad and 37% consider them average. Thus, drug sales and consumption in Lima continue hitting the municipality's approval ratings. About 59% believe that the administration's efforts in that area are going badly and 28% consider that its performance is average; only 7% see it as good.

Supporters come out for Villarán

In mid-May, social organizations, unions, political parties, and youth groups, integrated in the Coordinadora Ciudadana por Lima, marched in support of Villarán and against her recall.

"The march is to say that Susana is doing what she promised, not only in public works but also regarding helping people. The recall they are attempting would only bring weak governance and the freezing of public-works projects," Ivonne Tapia, president of the Coordinadora del Vaso de Leche, told La Primera. "It is also to support the mayor's transparent administration because now the city's bidding process is clean."

Agreeing with Tapia, Moisés Vega, secretary of the Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú (CGTP), also told La Primera that his organization rejects the recall because "we don't want the return of corruption and the mafia of rigged bids."

The march was more than 30 blocks long and ended with a rally in the Plaza San Martín in central Lima, which the mayor attended. "It's an impressive deployment of the people of Lima; it shows us that they are against the recall and understand that corrupt interests are involved," Villarán told the crowd. "This is direct support where there is no clientelism," she added, referring to the organizations' voluntary mobilization to support her administration.

The mayor has an arduous task ahead to be able to transform the present fleet of public-transportation vehicles into an authentic transportation system. To accomplish this, the municipality has determined the characteristics of vehicles that will be able to offer such service (Bus Patrón), setting in motion renovating the motor pool with new vehicles and thus reducing the accident rate as well as improving air quality.

"Our plan is to regulate transportation in Lima, to create a paradigm distinct from the present one. And a prerequisite was bringing order to this chaos that began in the 1990s and has still not ended, and which is based on great informality," said Villarán.

Retiring old vehicles will be accompanied by a jobs-training program for those leaving the transport sector, for whom the municipality will seek other employment options. The municipality's Gerencia de Dirección de la Economía Local has various programs linked to job creation and promoting micro- and small businesses.

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