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Peru’s New Cabinet Gets Reluctant Approval
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On the verge of a total crisis involving the Peruvian Cabinet, opposition members of Congress forced three ballots before giving new ministers a vote of confidence. Opposition legislators, however, maintained their demand that first lady Nadine Heredia stop actively participating in governmental affairs.

With then Housing Minister René Cornejo presiding, the Consejo de Ministros, which had been sworn into office on Feb. 24, appeared before Congress March 14. Article 130 of the Peruvian Constitution requires the Cabinet president, accompanied by the full Cabinet, to appear before Congress within the first 30 days of taking office "to present and discuss general government policy and key management measures." The required visit in effect raises the question of trust, essentially setting up a vote of confidence for the Cabinet. This Cabinet is the fifth under President Ollanta Humala, who is just midway through a five-year term.

In an unprecedented turn of events, abstention exceeded the support Congress gave the Cabinet twice. In the first vote, 71 deputies abstained while 47 gave their support to the Cabinet; in the second, 73 abstained, 42 cast yes votes, and six voted against. Those voting against the Cabinet were members of the ruling party trying in vain to neutralize the abstentions.

In a March 16 interview with La República, analyst Fernando Tuesta Soldevilla said, "Some ruling-party deputies voted that way [against] so that there would supposedly be an opposing view, not just abstentions. It was a ploy on their part, but in reality it reflected the weakness of a government that has had five Cabinets and exhibited an inability to build supportive alliances. This means it lacks leadership and political actors." Tuesta is a former president of the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (ONPE).

Congressional president Freddy Otárola then convened a new plenary session to again call for a vote of confidence for the Cabinet. Finally, on March 17, with 66 votes for, 52 against, and 9 abstentions, the Peruvian Congress gave a vote of confidence to the Cabinet headed by Cornejo.

Ever since the 1993 Constitution established the vote of confidence for the Cabinet, every Cabinet president has obtained congressional support with more affirmative votes than votes against or abstentions.

Prime minister resigns protesting interference by first lady
Cornejo assumed the presidency of the Consejo de Ministros hours after his predecessor resigned. Tendering his resignation, César Villanueva had claimed that first lady Nadine Heredia, president of the Partido Nacionalista Peruano (PNP) since December, had been interfering in governmental affairs (NotiSur, May 31, 2013). On Feb. 20, Villanueva said he and the Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas (MEF) were reviewing a possible increase in the living wage, currently set at 750 nuevos soles (US$268) a month. Worker demand for higher salaries had gained strength after ministers saw their monthly salaries increase 100% (from 15,600 to 30,000 nuevos soles, US$5,571 to US$10,714) in early February.
The next day, Heredia told reporters that the topic was not on the agenda. Then, two days later, Economy Minister Miguel Castilla said he had never worked with the prime minister on a minimum wage increase.

"If I made the decision to resign, it was because I will not allow such interference, regardless of how minor some consider it to be. Nevertheless, the interference wasn't small, and that's why I resigned. I took the decision the same day that she [Nadine Heredia] made her statements about the increase in the minimum wage," Villanueva told the Lima daily Peru 21.

Villanueva said that, from his point of view, Castilla’s declarations indicate the existence of "parallel teams or parallel powers" in the government.

Criticism of the first lady’s role in the government is not new and does not come from the opposition alone. A recent national urban poll by IPSOS-El Comercio found that 43% of those interviewed did not believe Heredia should participate actively in the government because she is neither elected nor appointed; 66% said her role impacts the Humala administration negatively. A national poll by Datum in March found that 64% believe that the first lady is in charge of the government while only 16% said they believe Humala governs.

Writing in the daily La Primera, Alberto Adrianzén, a political analyst and member of the Parlamento Andino, said, "That a majority consider the president is not governing and that another person is doing so is a serious political problem that could drive us to a much greater crisis of governability."

Heredia is often seen inaugurating projects and has appeared on the dais next to government ministers as they are sworn in. She also accompanies ministers when they travel. During the inauguration of Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, Heredia broke protocol by walking down a red carpet strictly reserved for chiefs of state. Since then, criticism of Heredia has been that she performs functions that do not correspond to her and that she usurps a place that she was not elected to. For many—notably former President Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011)—Heredia is already campaigning for the 2016 presidential elections.

President Humala, however, denies that his wife makes governmental decisions. "We are witnessing an abusive, rude, dirty campaign against Nadine Heredia by using the honorary title of first lady. They want to create the idea that she doesn’t have the right to state her opinion," the president told the press.

The congressional vote of confidence was taken after the Cabinet issued a communiqué in which Cornejo assured Peruvians that he would not allow any type of interference. This was sufficient for the Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC) to lend its support and the votes then went in favor of the executive.

Previously, the business group Confederación Nacional de Instituciones Empresariales Privadas (Confiep) asked members of Congress to support the Cabinet. "Hopefully they will vote in favor of giving confidence to a team of serious technocrats, without giving too much importance to frivolous anecdotes that don’t make a country governable. These events should not be allowed to jeopardize the continuity of the nation," said Confiep president Alfonso García Mir.

President Humala questioned the legislative delay in granting the vote of confidence for his Cabinet and blamed Congress for creating two days of instability.
Deputy Carlos Bruce of the Concertación Parlamentaria, a congressional bloc of independents and members of the Partido Aprista Peruano (APRA), said, "It is a lesson Congress sends the president so that he understand we are not a monarchy governed by family, a king and a queen, but a democracy where power is shared with Congress.

Cabinet challenged

Political analyst and historian Nelson Manrique wrote in his column in La República, "That Congress (initially) denied to lend its support is incidental. What is truly serious is the lack of a minimum base of legitimacy to govern. The Cabinet has a 10% approval rating according to IPSOS and it is because its president and one of its members are accused of corruption."

Deputy Víctor Andrés García Belaúnde of Acción Popular-Frente Amplio (AP-FA) has denounced Cornejo for not having left the Corporación Helios SAC until Oct. 25, 2012, 15 months after being named minister of housing, while Helios continued bidding on state projects even though such participation is illegal. Similarly, the new Minister of Women Carmen Omonte is involved in a mining concession in the department of Huánuco in central Peru. A news report on TV Panorama in March said that Omonte is a stockholder in Cemento Amazónico, although the law prohibits government officials from such involvement.

Cornejo denied the accusation against him. However, Peruvian Attorney General José Peláez on March 19 announced that the Ministerio Público (MP) had begun reviewing the situation. Peláez indicated that inquiries into accusations against Omonte have also begun.

García Belaúnde said that, after what occurred in Congress, the Cabinet headed by Cornejo "is left weakened and it will be difficult for this man to remain in charge of the Cabinet for very long."

In general, representatives of different congressional caucuses consider it important for Cornejo to make a rapid evaluation of the ministers and make adjustments. They believe there will be changes in the Cabinet in the next few weeks but doubt that Economy Minister Castilla will be among those pushed out.

"What is at issue is the hegemony of Castilla’s Cabinet with Nadine Heredia as its spokesperson. It is the imposition of the worst of neoliberalism that is being challenged," political analyst Sinesio López wrote in his March 20 column in La República.

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