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Peru’s Regional Elections Show Splintered Politics

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Category/Department: Peru
Published: 2014-10-24

Results of municipal and regional elections Oct. 5 present a depressing panorama of the national political scene: in Lima the winning candidate was the one who "steals but also produces public works;" the leftist mayor ended up in third place; and national political parties all but disappeared with victories going to candidates from regional organizations, many of whom are either under investigation for serious crimes or already face court action on such charges.

Lima’s former mayor Luis Castañeda Lossio (2003-2006, 2007-2010) from the Partido Solidaridad Nacional (PSN) won with 50.7% of the votes, reported the Organización Nacional de Procesos Electorales (ONPE). The surprise was that Partido Aprista Peruano (APRA) candidate Enrique Cornejo moved up from fourth to second place with 17.7% of the vote, pushing out Susana Villarán, the current mayor who received just 10.6% (NotiSur, Nov. 30, 2012, and March 29, 2013).

In an Ipsos Perú poll taken in the last week of September, 59% of Lima’s population said they would prefer that the next mayor be someone who carried out public works projects even if they stole. Only 16% said they would prefer a mayor who didn’t steal even if they didn't initiate public works projects. Castañeda’s main slogan during his campaign was "So the public works [projects] return."

Right-wing media presented an image of Villarán as someone who had initiated few or no public works in nearly four years in office. Apparently voters bought that idea.

However, with Villarán at the helm of the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima, there was greater implementation of public works spending than during Castañeda’s first period, according to official data from the Ministry of Economy and Finance. From 2003 to 2006, 42.5% of the total planned investment budget was implemented, while from 2011 to 2014, an average of 65.2% was spent. Villarán’s average was even higher than the 63.0% in Castañeda’s second term.

"In absolute terms, Castañeda’s first administration spent 553 million soles [US$192.6 million] while Villarán spent 1.4 billion soles [US$488.8 million] (projected through December 2014). The current mayor spent more than two and one-half times more than the former mayor," said the Peruvian daily Diario 16.

Mayor-elect Castañeda told weekly news magazine Correo Semanal Oct. 16, "Ms. Susana Villarán said she had spent twice as much on works as I did, in other words, she must have stolen twice as much. But consider this, the second thing we should think about regarding those who don’t produce works is where did the money go?"

Splintered left

Referring to results of elections involving Villarán in Lima as well as those involving Gregorio Santos in Cajamarca and other regional leaders, particularly those in mining areas, political analyst Sinesio López said the right-wing business community and the right-wing media had developed a political strategy to push the left off the national political scene (NotiSur, July 26, 2013, and Sept. 19, 2014).
Internal disagreements within the left played a role in Villarán’s electoral defeat. The mayor ran under the umbrella of Diálogo Vecinal, a registered political group. Although Tierra y Libertad of the Frente Amplio (FA) also held a current registration and had been an ally, that group decided not to back her candidacy after she allied herself with Perú Posible (PP), the party of former President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006), who is under investigation for possible money laundering. Villarán had tried to present a broad centrist coalition with Perú Posible’s support.

Anthropologist and historian Carlos Monge of Tierra y Libertad wrote in his blog La Mula, "Villarán refused to run on the Frente Amplio ticket in the primary elections or present herself as a Frente Amplio candidate and instead sought alliances with Perú Possible and, in a last ditch effort, she sought out an alliance with Diálogo Vecinal to back away from a leftist identity and the need to deal with internal democracy."

Nevertheless, political analyst Lopez wrote in his column in La República, "Some of the left’s ‘purist’ parties did not see her as a leftist politician or leftist enough and therefore did not endorse her or provide any backing, forcing her to seek support from a surrogate. Instead of responding to the challenge from the right with unity and the formation of a broad centrist-leftist coalition, the fragmented parties of the left committed political suicide before going into battle, abandoning Susana, and they now want to escape from any responsibility for the defeat."

Santos, regional president of Cajamarca, who has been jailed since last June pending trial and is under investigation for allegedly receiving money from business people who were awarded 11 bids for public works in his region, was re-elected with 46% of the valid votes. Santos, a leftist leader of Movimiento de Afirmación Social (MAS), has spearheaded a popular fight against the Conga mining project (NotiSur, July 26, 2013). Supporters in his political organization consider him a political prisoner and have called for his release since he has no plans to flee. The court said on Oct. 13, however, that he would remain in Piedras Gordas, a maximum-security prison in Lima. If Goyo, as Santos’s followers call him, is still in prison on Jan. 1, Hilario Medina Vásquez, MAS’s vice presidential candidate, will assume Santos’ post since the law bars anyone who is in jail from holding public office even if elected by popular vote.

"There had been a referendum Oct. 5, and the people of Cajamarca said Conga should not go ahead. This wasn’t just a re-election of Goyo. It was a referendum on the entire mining project, making it clear the extractive economic model in Cajamarca must be discussed in a democratic way with the people and their authorities," Santos said in an interview with La República on Oct. 11.

**National parties unrepresented**

As in previous elections (2006 and 2010), Peru’s national political parties have all but disappeared as regional movements have taken hold. None of the national parties—APRA, Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC), Fuerza Popular (FP), Acción Popular (AP), PP—have maintained a significant national presence. The governing Partido Nacionalista Peruano (PNP) didn’t even put forward any candidates.

APRA was even defeated in the capital’s Breña district where its headquarters is located as well as in the area once seen as the "solid Aprista north."

César Acuña, Alianza para el Progreso (APP) leader, won the post of regional president in La Libertad; his brother Humberto Acuña of the same party won the same office in Lambayeque.
Alianza para el Progreso began as a regional party but, after expanding on the campuses of the Universidad César Vallejo (UCV), it gained national stature, said former ONPE head Fernando Tuesta. "But two of 25 regions are nothing. The national parties have once again lost to regional organizations, deepening the troublesome gap between national and regional representation," Tuesta told La República.

National parties presented 149 slates of candidates (of a maximum of 475) in the 25 district constituencies, the same number as they did in 2002. In contrast, the presence of regional parties grew from 52 regional slates in 2002 to 147 this year.

Tuesta said that this panorama of party representation shows a divided and fractured country with fertile soil for the informal and illegal development of institutional politics.

Runoff elections will be held in 13 regions where no candidate garnered more than 30% of the vote. In half of these elections, the difference in voter preference between top contenders is less than 1%.

At least six of the regional presidents who won their elections are being investigated for money laundering or for their links to other illegal activities. César Acuña is under investigation for vote buying; Luis Ostuka of Madre de Dios faces seven charges of illegal mining; Wilfredo Oscorina of Ayacucho faces charges of misuse of funds. In April, a video circulated in which Jaime Rodríguez, who won the Moquegua regional presidency with 49% of valid votes, admitted that, in his previous term (2007-2010), he "stole and took funds by the truckload." Rodríguez faces several criminal charges including one for irregularities in the construction of a highway in 2008 (NotiSur, Sept. 19, 2014).

"It’s not that people want corrupt candidates but that they don’t believe in anyone. The corrupt ones have more money and more connections and can offer more in their campaigns," said political scientist Steven Levitsky.

Some worry about what these results may indicate for the 2016 presidential elections, but, for analysts like Monge, the picture will be different then "because all politics then will be handled by the national parties that performed horribly today."

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