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Presidential Contest in Peru Unpredictable
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Just over two months before Peru’s April 10 general election, 19 presidential candidates have registered with the Jurado Electoral Especial. Even though early polls show the actual battle will be between five of the contenders, many analysts say the final outcome is impossible to predict.

At the moment, the candidates from the right are ahead in the polls, with Keiko Fujimori of Fuerza Popular out front. According to a Jan. 17 survey by Ipsos Perú, if the elections were held tomorrow, 33% would vote for Fujimori, the same percentage she registered in a December poll. Fighting for second place are César Acuña, the candidate from Alianza para el Progreso (APP), and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, leader of Peruanos por el Kambio, (PPK), both polling at 13%. Following them are Alan García of Alianza Popular with 8%, and economist Julio Guzmán, representing Todos por el Perú, with 5%. Alejandro Toledo, the leader of Perú Posible, registered 3%.

Meanwhile, the percentage of voters who would definitely not favor Fujimori (something analysts call an anti-vote) dropped from 40% in December to 34% in January. The anti-vote percentages for former presidents García (1985-1990 and 2006-2011) and Toledo (2001-2006) were 61 and 62, respectively.

Attempts at renovation
Keiko Fujimori is the daughter of jailed former President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), whose 25-year sentence for violating human rights will end in February 2032. She is determined to show a renovated party and thus has distanced herself from the old guard (NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012, and April 26, 2013). In December, she announced that three of the congressional deputies closest to her father—Martha Chávez, Luisa María Cuculiza and Alejandro Aguinaga (criticized for the forced sterilizations that were carried out during Fujimori’s rule)—would not run for reelection. In addition, she has toned down her discourse, has recognized the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and has come out in favor of civil unions. She condemned the doctors involved in the forced sterilization program during her father’s government, and expressed solidarity with the women victimized by that program. Analysts say her goal is to reduce the number of people voting against her (the anti-vote) as she looks toward the runoff election scheduled for June. She is succeeding.

Corruption accusations
García faces corruption accusations that include colluding with drug dealers, negotiating to benefit the firm Discover Petroleum in 2008 for the exploitation of five oil fields, allowing individuals to benefit from the social program called Agua Para Todos (Water for All), and having connections with corrupt Brazilian companies. Those accusations, in addition to his responsibility for the death of civilians and policemen in a conflict with indigenous communities in the Amazon province of Bagua in 2009, could be generating mistrust among the citizenry (NotiSur, June 18, 2010). The same might be true for Toledo, who faces a criminal complaint for laundering of assets in the so-called Ecoteva case, which involved million-dollar real estate purchases). For many, the fact that Toledo is
no longer among the five top candidates indicates he has already lost and that he might not be able to pass the electoral barrier of 5%.

Political analyst Alberto Adrianzén notes that the electoral alliance between the Partido Aprista and the Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC) to form Alianza Popular is not having an effect on voters. PPC is the party of former congresswoman and 2001 and 2006 presidential candidate Lourdes Flores Nano, who is now a candidate for first vice president on the Alianza Popular slate. In the 2006 general elections, Flores Nano was labeled by García, now her running mate, as “the candidate of the rich.”

“It is very difficult for García to rise again because the alliance with Lourdes has been for convenience alone, in order to help each other keep from failing, but even so he didn’t manage to build his ratings in the polls. The fact is that García comes from factions on the right stained by corruption, and he distanced himself from APRA a long time ago. By uniting with García, Lourdes, who represents Christian Democrats, has accepted the clothes of the right and together they can’t attract the voters,” Adrianzén told the newspaper Uno.

Political Analyst Fernando Tuesta told La República: “The issue is not that García is fourth, but that Guzmán is now closer to him. If Guzmán were to surpass him, it would be an electoral catastrophe.”

Guzmán, who has worked for 10 years in the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, DC, and who entered the race calling himself the outsider, however, has not presented a platform that distinguishes him from the other top-five candidates. He uses social networks more than the rest to promote his candidacy, but his discourse lacks clarity and coherence.

Asked his opinion, for example, on whether there should be prior consultation with indigenous communities on issues that affect them directly (as mandated by a law enacted in 2011), his answers have varied. In one interview he said that, if elected, he would not maintain it because it could be used to manipulate those whom he wanted to defend. Then later, on Facebook, he said that he wasn’t against the law, but that he would look “to improve its implementation.” Guzmán added he would work with affected communities but “without stopping investment.” Many observers, while recognizing that Guzmán is a “novelty” in the presidential race, say that he is acting more like an insider than the outsider he claims to be.

The candidate with the most money is Acuña. He was the provincial mayor of Trujillo, La Libertad, for two consecutive periods between 2007 and 2014, and was regional governor of La Libertad in 2015. Acuña has declared an annual income of more than 56 million soles, or US$16.5 million, and assets valued at over 15 million soles, or US$4.4 million. He owns three universities, including the Universidad César Vallejo, where he is chairman of the board of stockholders and of the board of directors.

From a humble background, Acuña presents himself as an emerging entrepreneur, a fighter with high standards. However, he has been accused more than once of money laundering and is suspected of using money from the Municipality of Trujillo for his 2010 re-election campaign.

More of the same

The presidential race is bringing political rivals together even without ideological agreement. An example is the decision of the former mayor of Lima, Susana Villarán, of the center-left Fuerza Social, to run as a first vice-presidential candidate for the ruling Partido Nacionalista (NotiSur, March 29, 2013). That party’s slate is headed by Daniel Urresti, a retired Army general and former
interior minister during the current Ollanta Humala administration. Since last May, Urresti has been on trial for the assassination of journalist Hugo Bustíos in Ayacucho in 1998, when Urresti worked as an intelligence officer in an Army barracks.

Other candidates attract attention as well. The candidate for second vice-president in Fujimori’s Fuerza Popular slate is Vladimiro Huaroc, one of the founders of Fuerza Social; former Deputy Anel Townsend, Women’s Minister during the Toledo government, is running for first vice president on the APP presidential slate. Peru’s current vice president, Deputy Marisol Espinoza, who resigned from the Partido Nacionalista in September, also joined the APP slate. The APP is the party that has pulled the most deputies from other parties, five of them from the Partido Nacionalista, which has suffered 10 electoral desertions. In all, 28 members of Congress are running for re-election with party affiliations different from those they were elected under in 2011.

Even though Keiko Fujimori leads the pack, she’s still at 33%, with the major battle now being fought among the next four in the polls, all vying for a place in the run-off election. All four offer platforms that don’t question the current economic model, and present government plans without substantial pragmatic differences.

In this context, the candidacy of Verónika Mendoza from the leftist Frente Amplio, is as breath of fresh air. Mendoza, a deputy from Cusco, resigned in June 2012 from the governing congressional bloc and from her membership in the Partido Nacionalista Peruano. At the time, she expressed her profound disenchantment with the direction and behavior of the current government.

“For us, our government plan means a government at the service of the people and free of corruption. We guarantee an economy at the service of the people; we guarantee rights without any kind of discrimination,” Mendoza told the media after joining the slate of Frente Amplio, one of the two leftist parties participating in the campaign. The other is Democracia Directa, headed by Gregorio Santos, one of the opposition leaders against the mega-mining project Conga, in Cajamarca. Santos has been jailed since 2014, charged with passive corruption, criminal conspiracy and collusion against the state (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2011 and July 27, 2012).

But Mendoza faces difficulties. She has 2% of the vote in the presidential race, according to an Ipsos Perú poll, while 49% of the voters do not know who she is.

“The left has lost its direction, as it does not have a common goal or a political leader in charge of the transformation,” Adrianzén wrote in his column in La República. “The right does not represent the dominant elites—perhaps because it has captured the state and has its own representatives and lobbyists—and the left does not represent ‘the people,’ because ‘the people’ do not exist as an actor or political subject. In the end, both democracy and the electoral process are empty of substance.”

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