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Peruvian Electorate Polarized in Wake of Campaign Shakedown

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Less than a month from Peru’s April 10 presidential and congressional elections, the campaign season is overshadowed by the exclusion of two presidential candidates, the voluntary withdrawal of others, marked polarization, and the questioning of the electoral judicial panels (NotiSur, Jan. 29, 2016).

On March 8, the Jurado Nacional Electoral (JNE) excluded César Acuña, presidential candidate for the Alianza Para el Progreso (APP), and Julio Guzmán, candidate for the Todos por el Perú party (TPP). The decision to remove Acuña was unanimous, based on his violation of the Ley de Organizaciones Políticas, (the law regulating political organizations) when he gave 10,000 soles (US$3,003) to merchants in the city of Chosica, Lima province, and 5,000 soles (US$1,501) to a youth with disabilities during a campaign event in the northwestern department of Piura.

At the end of 2015, Congress modified the 2003 that prohibited political organizations from giving, promising or offering money or other financial gifts during elections, except for things that are considered electoral propaganda valued at less than 20 soles (US$6).

Acuña, who had been in third place in January with 13% of voting preferences, suffered a seven-point drop in February after he was accused of plagiarism—using texts by other authors and reports from international organizations—in his doctoral thesis for Spain’s Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Another accusation followed in connection with his master’s thesis, presented to the Universidad de Lima, and yet another of having copied a complete book about education that the Universidad César Vallejo published under his name. From this moment forward, all his titles, doctorates, and master’s degrees were put into question.

‘It’s a copy’

In respect to the accusations about plagiarism in his doctoral thesis, Acuña said that he had only failed to insert footnotes. About his master’s thesis, he said, “That was 25 years ago, when I did not know I was going to be a presidential candidate.” Regarding the education book, Acuña’s answer, which prompted the most memes in social media, was, “It’s not plagiarism, it’s a copy.”

On Feb. 24, Congressman Humberto Lay, of the Restauración Nacional party, a candidate for second vice president on the Acuña slate and to the Congress for Lima, presented his resignation to the JNE “for strictly personal reasons.”

On March 2, Anel Townsend of the APP withdrew her candidacy for a congressional seat, indicating that the party should clarify the accusations against Acuña. However, she maintained her candidacy for first vice presidency in the party’s slate.

For many analysts, journalists, intellectuals, and political leaders, the reason for the JNE to exclude Acuña as a presidential candidate should have been that he had included false information on the
resume he presented to that body. In the end, he was excluded for having given money to potential voters, to which Acuña responded, “I have been excluded for showing solidarity and supporting low-income people.”

The APP plans to continue campaigning with its list of congressional candidates.

The exclusion of Guzmán, who polled second in February with 18% of the anticipated vote, up 13 points from January, was decided with three votes in favor and two against after he got a demerit for not respecting the internal democracy of the party, specifically the rules for the election of candidates. His TPP party was completely removed from the race.

“This is a message of a corrupt system that wants to grab hold of power and that has no shame in using all means possible to do so,” Guzmán posted on his Facebook account. “This is a strike against democracy and it is an anticipated fraud.”

The electoral body’s decision, ratified and put into effect March 14, has provoked an open debate. On the one hand, there are those who say that, with Acuña and Guzmán out of the picture, nearly a fifth of the electorate has been left without the right to vote for the candidate of its choice. From the point of view of political scientist Steven Levitsky, Guzmán’s exclusion is a hard blow to Peruvian democracy, “the only democracy in Latin America that excludes a viable presidential candidate for bureaucratic reasons.”

On the other hand, others say that the electoral authorities aren’t consistent, since they didn’t rule the same way on other, similar cases.

“The JNE did not exercise the same rigor it applied to Acuña to the candidacy of Keiko Fujimori of Fuerza Popular, even though there are public photos and videos in which she appears giving away money in February,” said a communiqué signed by more than 100 citizens on March 14.

The statement, addressed to public opinion and to international observers from the Organization of American States and the European Union, also reads, “The JNE has not applied the same rigor it used for Guzmán to nullify the candidacy of Alan García of APRA and the Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC), despite the fact that the PPC broke its party rule to align itself with APRA.” The statement also noted that Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, of Peruanos por el Kambio (PPK), also violated its own rules in electing its presidential ticket.

Francisco Távara, head of the JNE, has insisted that the electoral body “acts impartially.”

Polarized elections

On March 11, the national executive committee of the ruling Partido Nacionalista withdrew its presidential candidate, Daniel Urresti, a former interior minister, as well as its parliamentary list. The decision was made in order to maintain its legal standing as a party, given that Urresti was below 1% in the polls in February. The electoral barrier is 5% of the vote. The JNE’s action in relation to Guzmán would also have influenced this decision.

In addition to the Partido Nacionalista, three other political parties have decided on their own to stay out of the race. The electoral law does not set a set time for when parties can withdraw from an election. By mid-March, 14 of the 19 parties that had initially registered for the general elections were still in the race.
As the campaign proceeds, special electoral tribunals are looking at new exclusion cases. On March 16, the Jurado Electoral Especial (JEE) of Huancayo excluded Vladimiro Huaroc as head of the Fuerza Popular’s congressional list because he gave away food packages during his campaign. The Lima JEE opened an exclusion proceeding against the leader of this same party for alleged gift giving.

The departures of Acuña and Guzmán have opened a new electoral panorama. Fujimori leads with 32%, two more points than she had in a February poll conducted by the research firm Ipsos. Kuczynski is in second place, having moved up from 9% to 14%. Tying in third place are Verónica Mendoza, from the leftist Frente Amplio, and Alfredo Barnechea, of Acción Popular, a center right party. Both went from 4% to 9%. Following them is Alan García, APRA leader, with 6%. García is also the candidate with the largest anti-vote (80%).

In the most recent Ipsos poll, which was made public on March 20, the order of the top four candidates remained the same, but Fujimori dropped slightly to 30.8% while Kuczynski rose a point to 15%, and Barnechea and Mendoza rose two points to 11.7% and 11.3%, respectively.

Analysts and polls indicate that no candidate will reach the 50% plus one of the votes on April 10, and therefore it won't be until the runoff elections on June 5 that the electorate will define who will occupy the presidency on June 28.

An Ipsos poll for the runoff election places Fujimori behind Kuczynski by one point, 39% and 40%, respectively. As for Barnechea and Mendoza, the poll puts Fujimori two points ahead of the first one (42% to 40%) and five points above the second (43% to 38%).

“What we see in this poll regarding the runoff is that Fujimorism and anti-Fujimorism are the most important parties in Peru today,” said Ipsos president Alfredo Torres. “We’re heading toward a polarized election.”

**Opposition to Fujimorism**

Many analysts say that the changes in the field of presidential candidates have invigorated the opposition to Fujimorism, which leads to the conclusion that the candidate that best positions himself or herself in that regard will be the most likely to defeat Fujimori in the runoff.

For some, such as the analyst Glatzer Tuesta, Kuczynski will be unable to rid himself of his earlier ties to Fujimorism. Tuesta recalled that after the first round of the 2011 elections, in which Kuczynski placed third, he supported Keiko Fujimori in the runoff against Ollanta Humala.

Young people in Lima and other Peruvian cities took to the streets en masse on March 11 and March 15 to demand that the JNE exclude Keiko Fujimori from the election. A third protest has been announced for April 5, a date that marks the anniversary of the autogolpe (self-coup) of Alberto Fujimori, the former president now serving a 25-year term for crimes against humanity (Notisur April 8, 1992, and May 1, 2009).

In the opinion of historian Nelson Manrique, the marches mark a watershed in the campaign, demonstrating “the ethical reaction of the youth, awakened by facing the possibility of Fujimorism coming back to power.”

In this context, and without the election tribunals having ruled on the public accusations against the PPK and the Alianza Popular APRA-PPC, the printing of the ballots has begun. If the tribunals
don’t issue any ruling, Peru will have the clearest proof, wrote Uno columnist Beatriz Mejía, “that the accusations about political control of the electoral system are true.”

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