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## Peru Faces Crises in Politics and Education

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A series of events—including a teachers' strike lasting more than 70 days; Congress' questioning and censure of the education minister 90 days after doing the same against her predecessor; its refusal to grant the vote of confidence requested by the prime minister, and the resulting reorganization of the Cabinet—shows that Peru's president is facing a political crisis. Continuously fueling this crisis is an already tense relationship between the executive branch and the opposition-controlled legislature.

In mid-June, public school teachers from the southeast department of Cusco, members of the Cusco unit of the Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores de la Educación Regional, began a strike that was joined by other regional unions until it went national a month later.

On July 12, teachers from guilds from 13 regions began an indefinite national strike led by teacher Pedro Castillo, who had been elected president of the of the strike committee by regional units of the teachers union, the Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores en la Educación del Perú (SUTEP). The SUTEP is controlled by the leftist Patria Roja party and is led by Alfredo Velásquez.

Thousands of teachers from different parts of the country moved their protest to Lima, Peru's capital, where they held rallies and blocked avenues and sections of strategic highways. Police responded with repression, and several teachers were injured.

The teachers' two main demands were an increase in salary to 2,000 soles (US\$615) a month in the short term and 4,050 soles (US\$1,246) by 2021, and the repeal of the General Education Law 28044 and the Education Reform Law, approved in 2012, which requires performance evaluations they say are designed to allow massive teacher layoffs.

### *A campaign promise*

The salary increase was a campaign promise of President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, also known as PPK, who vowed to deliver on that promise by the end of his first year in office, in other words, by the end of July 2017. According to a 2016 national survey of educators conducted by the Ministry of Education, 95% of public school teachers are dissatisfied with their salaries, and 27% hold a second job to be able to make ends meet. The survey also revealed that 63% of teachers are graduates of an institution of higher education, while 36% of teachers have studied at a university, a figure that drops to 24% in the rural sector.

As long as the dialogue between leaders of the strike committee and the Ministry of Education continued without reaching agreements, students ran the risk of losing a school year. Cusco teachers suspended their strike on Aug. 11, but the work stoppage continued in the rest of the country.

In the middle of strike negotiations, Interior Minister Carlos Basombrío reported that 5,000 teachers had signed up as backers of Movadef (Movimiento por la Amnistía y los Derechos Fundamentales), a rights organization linked to the terrorist Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). Speaking to the Congressional Education Commission, he said that 25 of the 30 leaders present in the dialogue with the government had Movadef ties.

Basombrío said later that he never intended to accuse the teachers—309,000 of them work in public schools— of being terrorists, but that “there are some leaders in some places where [Movadef members] have infiltrated.”

Nevertheless, President Kuczynski sent a message to the nation on Aug. 16: “Education shouldn’t be mixed with the political ambitions of a few. We cannot allow violent ideologies, like those that support a movement with terrorist origins, to have a role in these strikes,” he said.

Union leaders continued meeting with the Ministry of Education but without reaching any agreements. The main point of contention is that, by law, teachers can be fired following performance evaluations.

In this context, Congress, with its Fujimorista majority, decided to question Education Minister Marilú Martens on Aug. 25.

Teachers suspended the strike Sept. 2 after winning salary increases from 1,780 (US\$548) to 2,000 soles (US\$615) a month for teachers at the lowest level and up to 3,500 soles (US\$1,077) for teachers on the top rung of the scale. They also got an agreement there would be in-person training before the first performance evaluation. There will be three evaluations in all, allowing for dismissal if a teacher fails to pass all three. Although teachers are not in agreement with the final part of this proposal, they did consent to the evaluation system.

“The national congress [of regional education leaders held on Sept. 1] decided to temporarily suspend the strike for the sake of our students, our parents, for the people in general,” Castillo told hundreds of strikers at a demonstration in Lima. He made it clear, however, that they were not ending the protest, but merely suspending it.

### *PPK’s second Cabinet*

“From the start, there was no strategy, no decision, no firm hand to tackle the problem or provide a solution. Therefore, it was agreed to question the minister of education,” Congressman Daniel Salaverry, spokesman for the Fujimorista caucus, told the daily La República. Martens went before Congress for questioning on Sept. 8.

That same day, the daily El Comercio published a report that quoted Martens as saying, “What is atypical about this strike is that there is a fractured guild that does not recognize the national union; we have overestimated the national SUTEP. We also have learned that we have to strengthen regional competencies. Another self criticism is that we were not able to implement supplementary school service immediately after this illegal strike began.”

At the end of congressional questioning of the minister, Fujimorista congressional representatives concluded that the president should dismiss Martens because she had not known how to manage the teachers strike and because her responses to their questions were unsatisfactory.

On Sept. 12, the Fuerza Popular caucus agreed to present a motion to censure Martens. The next day, Cabinet President Fernando Zavala asked Congress for a vote of confidence for all the ministers, in hopes of preventing Martens from being dismissed from her post.

“I am here because in recent weeks it has been shown that it is the intention of different groups to undermine a fundamental state policy for this government and for millions of students and their parents: educational reform,” Zavala said. Clearly referring to Fuerza Popular, he added, “The

quality of the education of our students, and thus the opportunity for them to have a better future, is at stake. Let's not put that future in jeopardy because of short-term interests."

Recalling that the current Congress had censured Jaime Saavedra, the former minister of education Zavala said, "To have censured a minister and to try to now censor the current minister of education in charge of this state policy not only censures the policy itself but also undermines the team I have the honor to lead."

Saavedra was questioned for irregularities in the acquisition of computers and the delay in construction of facilities for the 2019 Pan-American Games to be held in Lima ([NotiSur, Feb. 24 2017](#)). He now is the top education authority at the World Bank.

After eight hours of debate on Sept. 14, Congress rejected the proposal for a vote of confidence—mostly with votes from Fuerza Popular—forcing Zavala's departure and the creation of a new Cabinet. The Fujimoristas asked that no minister from the first Cabinet return to the new one.

On Sept. 17, a new 19-member Cabinet was sworn in with Second Vice President Mercedes Aráoz replacing Zavala and with new ministers in charge of the economy, education, health, justice, and housing. All other ministers retained their posts.

The Constitution gives the president the right to dissolve the legislature if two Cabinet members are censured or two Cabinets are denied a vote of confidence in a single administration. The Cabinet headed by Aráoz will go before Congress on Oct. 12 to present its governmental policies and to be invested. However, it has already been welcomed by spokespersons for Fuerza Popular, Apra, Acción Popular, and Nuevo Perú (a group made up of representatives who split from the leftist Frente Amplio caucus).

A Sept. 18 editorial in *La República* noted: "Knowing the composition of the new Cabinet, with six changes including the leader, the parliamentary majority has yielded its main demand: that no current minister be ratified, and thus welcomed the beginning of a new relationship between the powers. This change is not without cost, but it is the confirmation that they have attained their goal that PPK design a Cabinet they can either accept or tolerate."

In the view of political analyst Alberto Adrianzén, "the Fujimorists acceptance of this new Cabinet, despite having said that that the new Cabinet could not include any of the previous ministers, demonstrates that the Fujimoristas' confrontational politics has limits, because its actual goal was a Cabinet closer to its interests."

Idel Vexler, the new education minister, while having years of experience as the vice minister of pedagogical management under three presidents, is known for his opposition to educational reform and the inclusion of the expression "gender identity" in the national curriculum, positions that coincide with those of Fujimorism.

On the other hand, there is speculation in political circles that the appointment of Enrique Mendoza, who has been on the Supreme Court, to replace Marisol Pérez Tello as head of the Justice Department is the result of Pérez Tello's opposition to an eventual pardon for former President Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year prison sentence for crimes against humanity. Pérez Tello has said the only way she could grant a humanitarian pardon would be if Fujimori had an illness that warranted it ([NotiSur, May 27, 2016](#)). Mendoza has merely indicated that a pardon for Fujimori is not on the government's agenda at this time, backing up similar pronouncements from Aráoz.

“The issue of clemency is not a topic that is on the current political agenda, but if the president eventually gives a humanitarian pardon, I couldn’t bring myself to be so bad as to be against something based on health reasons,” Aráoz said on Radio Programas del Perú. She said that Mendoza has been named minister for his experience in the justice sector.

There appears to be a move toward a rapprochement between the executive and legislative branches, perhaps based on what they share: their conservative position regarding the management of the country’s economy and the need to contain social conflicts.

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