



# A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Eddie Bejarano explains why in Peru, old wounds are likely to remain open

**I**mages of civil unrest have emanated from Peru since the arrest of then-President Pedro Castillo on 7 December in Lima. These have ranged from peaceful protests to violent demonstrations that have caused civilian deaths. For many onlookers, it would appear that Peru has reached a historical inflection point that will require the government to address protesters' demands for fundamental reforms to the country's social, political and economic foundations. However, in my view, there is a very low chance that the government will use this opportunity to carry out worthwhile change.

Civil unrest in Peru began in December 2022 following the impeachment and arrest of then-President

Pedro Castillo, after he attempted to mount a coup. Immediately following his removal from office, Dina Boluarte, Castillo's vice president, was sworn in as the country's sixth president since 2017. Castillo had come to power on the promise to bridge Peru's social divides. His arrest marked the end of a shortened presidential term mired by several failed impeachment attempts by the Peruvian Congress and allegations of corruption against him and some of his ministers.

According to an official report by the country's human rights ombudsman, covering the period from 7 December 2022 to 7 February 2023, 59 people, including 58 civilians and one police officer, have been killed in anti-government protests. And 58 of the 59 protest-related deaths have occurred in areas of Peru outside of the capital Lima. They were particularly in

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the southern regions of the country. It is largely citizens from the south of Peru who have taken to the streets to demand political, social and economic change. Outrage stemming from the perceived use of excessive, and in some instances fatal, force by the authorities has become a further rallying cry for demonstrators.

Castillo's arrest was the spark that ignited the flame of unrest because of what he meant for millions of people. To his supporters, Castillo, a former teachers' union leader, represented the historically marginalised rural and indigenous citizens. He was seen as a political outsider who would seek to undo the political, economic and social injustices that many Peruvians have experienced for decades. For them his arrest marked the end of a brief moment in Peru's history where marginalised people finally felt politically represented. It also seemed to be a missed opportunity to enable equitable change from within the country's democratic institutions.

The anti-government protests currently involve a mix of social and political actors. These include rural self-defence groups, local political and social leaders, indigenous communities, student groups from universities, and various workers unions. Local media reports suggest that the majority of demonstrators come from several of Peru's poverty stricken Andean regions in the south, including Apurimac, Arequipa, Ayacucho, Cusco and Puno. The demonstrators have mainly voiced four demands: first, the resignation of President Boluarte; second, that elections scheduled for 2026 be moved forward to this year; third, an overhaul of the Constitution; and fourth, the dissolution of Congress.

The authorities in Peru have maintained a significant tactical advantage over the protesters. In most videos showing clashes between the police and protesters, it is evident that the majority of demonstrators are unarmed, though some have attacked the police with sticks, rocks and other improvised projectiles. Conversely, the police have riot gear, tear gas, batons and military-grade protective gear. A clear example of the authorities' tactical advantage was evident on 21 January when they used an armoured vehicle to knock down the gates of a university to detain protesters who had gathered there. Protesters have had to rely on rudimentary tactics to cause disruption, given that the government maintains a monopoly on violence.

Roadblocks are their more successful tactic. On 5 February, the Peruvian government reported that there were 72 roads being blocked by protesters along 15 national highways, the majority of which are occurring in southern Peru. This is causing supply chain disruptions, according to local news reports. In Cusco, for instance, there have been reports of fuel shortages due to road blockades preventing deliveries. There have been no reports of shortages in Lima and the government's ongoing campaign to dismantle roadblocks along the Pan-American highway suggest that maintaining a flow of basic goods into the capital is a priority. Incidents of violence have commonly occurred at roadblocks, particularly when the authorities have used force to dismantle them. Many of these violent incidents have ended with fatalities.

The tourism industry has been the most affected by the anti-government protests. As of February,

several Western embassies have changed their travel advisories and are recommending that citizens avoid any protests. The country's main airport, Jorge Chavez International Airport in Lima, continues to operate normally despite the protests. However, flight operations have been sporadically suspended at various airports in southern Peru, including at the international airport in Cusco. And in a sign of the disruptive impact of these protests on tourism, the government temporarily closed the popular site of Machu Picchu in January, which is one of the main revenue sources for the country. It reopened on 15 February.

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The unrest has also negatively impacted the operations of foreign companies with investments in mines and oil pipelines in Peru. In Cusco, the Antapaccay copper mine suspended operations on 20 January after protesters attacked the premises, one of the largest in the country, for the third time that month. Similarly, the Las Bambas copper mine, which provides about 2 percent of the global copper supply, halted production on 1 February, citing security concerns stemming from the protests.

Lastly, shortly after the protests began, some media outlets speculated about the potential role that Shining Path, a communist guerrilla organisation that led an unsuccessful and violent insurgency in Peru in the Eighties and Nineties, was playing in the current unrest. To date, there has not been any evidence to suggest that this is the case. Furthermore, in my analysis, it is unlikely that the Shining Path would be playing a leading role in the protests. The group has not been a significant political force since the early Nineties and most of its activities since its failed insurgency have centred around narco trafficking.

There is a very low probability that this period of acute civil unrest in Peru will bring about meaningful change. There are three reasons for this: first, there is seemingly no political will among Peru's elected representatives to implement impactful change; second, the protest movement's decentralised structure means that it cannot act as a unified body with an agreed set of leaders and demands; and last, barring fundamental change to Peru's political system, public disillusionment with these systems is likely to subvert any future political solutions.

Peru's elected officials are unlikely to use this historical opportunity to pass reforms. In December 2022, Congress approved moving the election from 2026 to April 2024, but on current indications, moving the election up even further does not appear likely. On 1 February, President Boluarte introduced a measure to move the general election up to December 2023, one of the protest movement's key demands, but Congress rejected the proposal. To date, Congress has rejected three such proposals. According to experts on Peruvian domestic politics,

this is because the country's governing body remains deeply divided and political parties are likely to demand political concessions for their support.

Even in a scenario where legislators do move up the elections to this year, this is highly unlikely to be a long-lasting solution to the country's political paralysis. In the absence of reforms that would limit Congress's power to impeach a president and limit the president's ability to dissolve Congress, Peru's next elected leader will almost certainly encounter the same issues that their seven predecessors have. Foremost, they would probably spend most of their tenure fending off impeachment attempts and replacing ministers, rather than implementing any kind of agenda. In turn, public confidence in the authority they have would erode rapidly, and the president would probably find themselves governing with little popular legitimacy.

## CIVIL UNREST BEGAN IN 2022 FOLLOWING THE ARREST OF THEN-PRESIDENT CASTILLO

The lack of a cohesive protest movement will probably prevent significant political dialogue, which means that long-term progress is doubtful. The protest movement does not appear to have an identifiable leadership and demonstrators' demands have varied. Given that the government does not have a clear negotiating partner to work with, there is a low chance that it will need, or be able, to address some of the protesters' more complex demands – such as changing the constitution. In the long term, so long as the anti-government movement remains disjointed, the government will probably enact piecemeal reforms that seek to

stabilise the country, rather than enact changes that would alter the status quo.

Finally, lasting change in Peru appears highly unlikely in the long term. This is because the citizenry appears to have lost faith in the country's democratic systems. According to the latest available polling from the Institute of Peruvian Studies, 89 percent of respondents disapproved of Congress's performance to date. And this very high level of disapproval was consistent across various groups, regardless of which part of the country they came from, their age and socioeconomic status. What's more, when respondents were asked who could be a good presidential candidate in the next general elections, 58.8 percent said they were not sure while 17.3 percent said nobody. Decades of pervasive corruption driven by seemingly self-serving elected officials appears to have led many Peruvians to conclude that the political establishment does not have the capacity to effectively govern.

Peru's democracy appears to be at an inflection point. But the individuals and parties charged with representing the will of the people appear unlikely, arguably unwilling, to fulfil their duties. With reasonably high confidence, I anticipate that the government will provide protesters with limited political concessions over the coming months to restore order and calm to the country. The protesters themselves are likely to become fatigued from engaging in daily protests, given that the majority of them are hundreds of miles away from their families and homes.

Looking further ahead, the country is on an unsustainable path. Short of major changes to the country's political structure, Peru will remain susceptible to bouts of violent unrest. Even when this current cycle of unrest ends, it is likely that periodical outbreaks of civil unrest will persist over the coming years. It is clear that moving forward Peru's historically marginalised communities will demand that their grievances be heard and addressed ●

**Eddie Bejarano** is an intelligence analyst for the Americas desk at Dragonfly, a geopolitical and security intelligence service for professionals who guide decision making in the world's leading organisations.

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