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Is There a Way Out of Peru's Strife?

Mass protest has rocked Peru for two months, leading to 60 deaths. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Glaeldys González Calanche explains the root causes of the crisis and sketches some possible ways forward.



**Glaeldys
González
Calanche**

Giustra Fellow, Latin
America
Bogota

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PERU

What ignited the wave of protests sweeping Peru for the past two months, and why has the unrest turned so deadly?

On 7 December 2022, Pedro Castillo, then president of Peru, addressed the nation hours before facing a third Congressional vote to force him from office for “permanent moral incapacity”, which is grounds for impeachment under the country’s constitution. Announcing the immediate dissolution of Congress, the left-wing Castillo said he would create a “government of exception” to rule by decree until new legislative elections. Branded a “self-coup” (*autogolpe*, in Spanish) because it would ensconce a sitting leader, the move was vehemently condemned across the political spectrum, including by members of Castillo’s own cabinet, as well as by the security forces. Castillo was arrested and impeached soon thereafter, with Vice President **Dina Boluarte taking his place**. Castillo’s removal, while prompted by his own power grab, sparked a national furore. Except for a brief pause around

Christmas, protests and violence have flared on and off ever since.

The demonstrations have no clear leadership nor a unanimous set of grievances, but they have coalesced around a few core demands: Boluarte's resignation and for some (but not all) protesters, Castillo's release from jail; immediate general elections; the closure of Congress; and the creation of an assembly to draft a new constitution. The protests have drawn support from a wide variety of constituencies, including students, teachers, farmers, trade unionists and Indigenous peoples, as well as groups such as *frentes de defensa* (defence fronts) and *rondas campesinas* (rural patrols), community self-defence groups that emerged during Peru's armed conflict of the 1980s and 1990s. Sizeable and sustained mobilisations have emerged in Peru's southern areas – a region with a large Indigenous population and high levels of poverty – as well as big coastal cities such as Callao and the capital Lima.

A majority of Peruvians are fed up with the country's dysfunctional system of governance.

Wherever they have flared, these protests have tapped into a seam of deep discontent. A majority of Peruvians are fed up with the country's dysfunctional system of governance: according to a [poll](#) from the Institute of Peruvian Studies, 69 per cent of the public now agree with calling an assembly to rewrite the constitution, which was promulgated under the authoritarian rule of former President Alberto Fujimori in 1993. But protesters' grievances have deeper roots as well. Peru is a profoundly unequal country: power and financial resources tend to be concentrated in the hands of white urban elites, while the sizeable Indigenous rural minority has been plagued by racism and lack of economic opportunity. This segment of the population identified with Castillo, a former teacher from the rural highlands. They see his impeachment as a direct attack on their community.

As violence surrounding demonstrations intensified, demands for justice for the victims further inflamed the protest movement. Of the 60 people who have died to date, an estimated 48 have been killed in clashes with security forces. Government [officials](#) argue that police have acted in self-defence, but there is overwhelming [evidence](#) that officers have resorted to lethal force, including live gunfire, when they did not need to do so. On 9 January, local authorities in the southern town of [Juliaca](#) confirmed that seventeen demonstrators had died from gunshot wounds, as well as one police officer who was burned to death in an attack by a mob. National and international [human rights](#) groups have spoken out against the abuses, while the [prosecutor's office](#) is carrying out a preliminary investigation into charges of murder and genocide against Boluarte and members of her cabinet.

How has the newly formed government responded so far?

Even as the government has mounted a ham-fisted response to the protests, it has kept the door open to compromise with opposition forces on certain key issues. On one hand, [Boluarte's government](#) has declared a state of emergency in protest-hit cities, extending it once already, dismissed some of demonstrators' demands as

unrealistic and blamed alleged foreign provocateurs for the unrest. But on the other, the president has also insisted she is determined to maintain a spirit of dialogue with opponents. She has attempted to expedite the timetable for general elections and entertained possible constitutional reforms – both key demands for many of the protesters.

Boluarte is in essence walking a political tightrope. She assumed the presidency without a formal party affiliation or any support in Congress. While she was once a member of Perú Libre, a party with a broadly Marxist orientation, she **broke ranks** in 2022 over reported ideological differences; as a result, she now depends on conservative factions to govern. Initially, she resisted allowing voters to go to the polls before 2024, which was a non-starter for the many Peruvians who do not view **her presidency as legitimate**. She has since acceded to the demand to allow for elections in 2023, but Congress would need to ratify the change. Specifically, 87 of the 130 deputies in Peru's single-chamber Congress would have to sign off on the measure, and at this point the necessary votes have not been forthcoming. As things stand now, Peruvians are next slated to vote in national elections in 2026.

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Part of the issue is that left-wing parties have declared they will only back the expedited election if it comes paired with a referendum on convening a constituent assembly to write a new charter. **The Peruvian constitution is a relic of the Fujimori era: it was adopted in 1993, a year after the former president shuttered the Congress and ruled by decree. While Fujimori did accede to reopening the legislature, the constitution adopted during his authoritarian rule concentrated powers in the executive by eliminating the Senate and cutting the number of representatives in half.**

Deputies have begun discussing a number of political and electoral reforms that (while short of a full rewrite) would amend the constitution and therefore will require either two qualified majority votes in successive legislative periods or an absolute majority and subsequent ratification by referendum. These include restoring a second chamber of Congress, allowing deputies to be re-elected to consecutive terms, creating special electoral districts and reforming the bodies that run the electoral system.

Though many experts deem these reforms to be essential to enhance political representation, these moves have instead reinforced the perception among some Peruvian voters that deputies are motivated by self-interest. Critics point out that the changes these elected officials are championing – such as the provision allowing for consecutive terms – would allow these politicians to retain their Congressional seats. The fact that they have simultaneously resisted setting a date for early general

elections accentuates the perception that they are clinging to power. Congress is saddled with its lowest **approval** rating since the current parliamentary term began in 2021. Meanwhile, political parties are the most discredited public institutions in the country: only **4 per cent** of Peruvians trust them.

As these Congressional battles rage on, the government has continued to rely on the state of emergency to keep protesters in check. After first declaring it on 12 December, the government **renewed** the measure in mid-January for 30 more days in Lima, the southern regions of Cusco and Puno, and several other provinces. In early **February**, the government prolonged the state of emergency for 60 days in seven southern regions. This move allowed the military to support police in restoring order. It also suspended prohibitions on raiding private properties as well as civil liberties such as the constitutional right to freedom of movement and freedom of assembly. **Boluarte** and her prime minister, Alberto Otárola, have argued the tough measures were necessary because demonstrations have threatened lives and public property.

Who does the government blame for the protests?

In addition to accusing protesters of endangering public safety, Boluarte alleges that criminal and terrorist infiltrators are **“generating violence”** in the demonstrations. Prime Minister Otárola has gone further, claiming that armed groups financed by **“foreign interests and the dark money of drug trafficking”** were **“destroying the country”**. Bolivia’s left-wing former president, Evo Morales, and eight other Bolivian citizens have been banned from entering Peruvian territory, on suspicion of interfering in Peru’s internal affairs.

Police and prosecutors say Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), the Maoist insurgency that plunged the country into two decades of conflict, leaving more than 10,000 **dead, is implicated in today’s tumult**. This group has been in decline since the 1990s, though remnants remain in the Valley of the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro rivers, also known as the VRAEM. Authorities **arrested** a handful of people on charges of belonging to Shining Path and taking part in violent disturbances in Ayacucho in mid-December.

Officials also point to the involvement of armed criminal groups in the protests.

Officials also point to the involvement of armed criminal groups in the protests. In the north-western region of La Libertad, there have been **reports** that a gang called Los Cagaleches de Virú is profiting from road blockades by charging truck drivers crossing fees. But these are isolated cases and are insufficient to account for the protest movement’s rise.

In sum, it appears that officials have greatly overstated the armed and criminal groups' level of participation. Boluarte's critics say that this tactic is the latest iteration of the longstanding Peruvian practice of *terruqueo*, by which authorities and their allies illegitimately malign their opponents as violent agitators. "The argument that there is widespread infiltration in the protests is nonsense. It has no credibility", a well-known Peruvian academic told Crisis Group.

The government's claims that protesters are acting under the influence of terrorists and foreign provocateurs, together with its reliance on heavy-handed law enforcement, have deepened rifts among the country's political leaders. Five ministers have **resigned** in disagreement over how the turmoil has been handled; left-wingers in Congress have started collecting **signatures** requesting Boluarte's removal from office; and three **regional governments** have demanded her immediate resignation.

What are the drivers of Peru's political crisis?

Peru's current instability has many drivers – including enormous inequality, extreme polarisation and an economic downturn linked in part to the COVID-19 pandemic – but it can be most directly traced to the 2016 presidential election. That year, economist Pedro Pablo Kuczynski defeated Keiko Fujimori, the former president's daughter, by a razor-thin margin of 0.24 percent. At the same time, Fujimori's Fuerza Popular won **Congress** by a landslide, gaining 73 of the 130 seats. The bitter rivalry between political forces morphed into a conflict between the branches of government, an outcome that the Peruvian constitution fostered by allowing both the legislature and the executive branch to weaponise checks and balances against one another. Hounded by accusations of corruption and besieged by the opposition in Congress, Kuczynski resigned in March 2018 and was promptly replaced by Martín Vizcarra. Vizcarra's term was equally tumultuous: he used the **president's power to dissolve Congress in 2019 after two no-confidence votes in the executive cabinet**, and a year later the legislative branch impeached him based on the vague and malleable grounds of "permanent moral incapacity".

Moves to dismiss the president and dissolve Congress have in effect become routine in Peru.

Against this backdrop, moves to dismiss the president and dissolve Congress have in effect become routine in Peru. The country has had six presidents in seven years, due to resignation or impeachment on grounds of "incapacity", and three different parliaments. The grinding series of showdowns has weakened the government's ability to craft policy, while eroding the state's capacity to respond to public needs and demands. **Polarisation between rival left- and right-wing political forces and extreme party fragmentation have made it excruciatingly hard to reach a consensus on how to address challenges such as food insecurity, rural poverty and reforms to a health system that failed many citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the world's highest mortality rate** from the disease. The health emergency caused by the virus and its extremely inequitable impact on the Peruvian population only intensified the conflict between the two branches of state. Congress impeached then-President Vizcarra in 2020, paving the way for Castillo's eventual emergence the next year.

Meanwhile, endemic graft – four living ex-presidents have faced such legal accusations – has decimated Peruvians' trust in elected officials. A 2021 poll found that 88 per cent of Peruvians believed their politicians were corrupt, the highest **rate** in Latin America and the Caribbean. Satisfaction with **democracy** has fallen sharply for more than a decade in Peru, reaching its lowest point in 2021. The country ranks second to last in the region on this score, above only Haiti. Trust in elections has also plunged from 46 per cent of those surveyed to 33 per cent in less than a decade.

What is the way out of the crisis?

While the intensity of protests and related violence will ebb and flow, finding an enduring way out of the crisis is going to take some time. A chasm separates the authorities and protesters and neither side shows much willingness to budge. With a few exceptions, the government has shown itself hostile or indifferent to protesters' demands, while a final decision on early elections and an assembly to rewrite the constitution remains stalled in Congress. **Demonstrations have tailed off in recent days and the areas most affected by protests remain blocked off from the rest of the country. Still, protesters insist they** will keep taking to the streets until they achieve their aims. As one Indigenous leader told Crisis Group, demonstrators "will not leave as losers". Without reforms that tackle the fundamental drivers of the discontent, a new cycle of massive protests could start at any point. So, what can Peru's political leaders do to de-escalate tensions in the near term?

First, they can make clear that they take seriously the idea of constitutional reform, which increasingly appears to be a necessary route to easing the deadlock between the government's political branches. Without it, Peruvian presidents stand virtually no chance of implementing the programs on which they are elected. President Boluarte looks to be amenable to a constitutional rewrite and the idea enjoys relatively wide support in Peru. If properly planned and proactively rolled out beyond Lima, it could be used as means of re-establishing the state's legitimacy in disgruntled rural communities.

This effort would require a lot of thoughtful dialogue and political finesse: previous constitutional processes across the region, most recently in Chile, have demonstrated how important it is to reach consensus across the political spectrum, particularly when it comes to placating the business sector and winning over conservative constituencies. Equally important will be guaranteeing that communities that have felt systematically excluded from decision-making are able to have their voices heard.

Secondly, and more immediately, political leaders can continue to explore the prospects – however dim – of how bringing presidential and legislative elections forward could help the country move beyond the present impasse. This remains the one issue that generates a degree of consensus among Peruvians of all political tendencies. But, as discussed above, there are major obstacles. Holding elections before the end of 2023 would require members of Congress to cut their terms short, which they seem reluctant to do. Moreover, holding elections under the same procedures as before, with a highly fragmented party system and

largely unrepresentative politicians, runs the risk of reproducing the toxic rivalry between the presidency and Congress that lies behind the present crisis, exacerbating tensions rather than finding a route to resolving them. As noted, Congress has debated reforms that might help address inter-branch dysfunction, but those ideas have not won either consensus among the deputies or support among the public.

The risks of renewed upheaval if the protesters feel ignored underscore the need for more channels of dialogue.

Thirdly, the risks of renewed upheaval if the protesters feel ignored underscore the need for more channels of dialogue between the government and protesters, as well as among rival political forces. Government efforts to build bridges with different sectors of society and local authorities have so far been limited. The **National Agreement Forum** (Acuerdo Nacional) – a space for dialogue among national, regional and local government officials, political parties with representation in Congress and Peru's main civil society groups – could help establish some common ground. At present, however, it does not include those who have played a major role in the protests, such as unions, Indigenous communities and students. Peruvian **officials** insist that strengthening the forum by broadening its membership base could enable progress toward a political solution. Boluarte called a forum meeting in early January, but the violence in Juliaca postponed it; the group has not met since. A number of separate dialogue meetings have also **fizzled** out due to the refusal of local authorities and social leaders in the south to take part, as well as the difficulty of reaching peripheral regions because of road blockages.

There are several mediators – both domestic and international – who might be able to play a useful role. These include the Interreligious Council of Peru, made up of representatives of various faiths, which has already **expressed** willingness to mediate. The **UN** and **EU** have also proclaimed themselves ready to collaborate in a negotiation effort. Both these bodies were involved in emergency talks in neighbouring Bolivia to set the path to new elections following violent unrest over claims of fraud in the 2019 presidential polls and the ensuing resignation of former President Morales. Other Latin American countries are less well-positioned to support talks given stark differences over Boluarte's legitimacy, with the **Mexican, Argentine, Bolivian, Colombian** and **Honduran** governments condemning Castillo's impeachment as a coup. In February, moreover, the Foreign Relations Committee in the Peruvian Congress declared Colombian President Gustavo Petro "persona non grata" for comparing the Peruvian police to Nazis, due to the repressive tactics they had employed against protesters.

Finally, pending possible negotiations, the parties could take steps to lay the groundwork for a successful process. For example, the government could send a signal of good faith by expediting investigations into deaths that occurred during the protests, as the **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights** suggested after a

three-day visit to the country, and charging those responsible. The official reaction to the Commission's eventual report, due soon, will be keenly watched.

For their part, the leaders of protest movements need to work toward greater coordination. There have been some efforts in this vein. Academics in **Puno** have requested that the governor instal a forum with local authorities and civil society representatives to establish a common list of demands that could form the basis for talks.

This step is promising; it is the sort of action that internal and external actors should encourage. Until the parties make progress toward a dialogue process that can help rebuild the legitimacy of Peru's democracy, any remedy for the unrest may wind up merely setting off another crisis down the road.