



Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru

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Principal Findings

What's new? The protests that engulfed Peru after the arrest of the president in late 2022 marked its largest outbreak of instability in recent times. Although peace has returned, public grievances driven by distrust of political leaders, economic inequality and extreme polarisation make the country ripe for future unrest.

Why does it matter? Peru's hard-won democratic transition in the early 2000s, as well as peaceful ties between national authorities and communities in poorer rural and Indigenous areas, have both come under huge strain due to rising economic discontent, the COVID-19 pandemic, political acrimony, government dysfunction and state violence.

What should be done? Concrete near-term steps to reform the party system to make it more responsive to citizens and stem the destructive battles between the executive and legislature are essential for curbing political turmoil. Regional and national dialogue, backed by foreign partners, should help frame a longer-term agenda for constitutional and economic change.

Executive Summary

Stark political differences and social divides have pushed Peru into successive bouts of strife, each more punishing than the last. Though it appears to have recovered from the protests that paralysed cities and highways in late 2022, the threads tying its citizens and leaders together are fraying. No country in Latin America suffers higher rates of dissatisfaction with democracy and its institutions. Despite years of economic growth, for many Peruvians living conditions are unbearably harsh and state protections threadbare. Against the backdrop of COVID-19, which claimed more lives per capita in Peru than in any other nation on earth, the electorate in 2021 plumped for a left-wing teacher and union leader, Pedro Castillo, to be president. Sixteen months into his term, Castillo tried – and failed – to concentrate power in his own hands by declaring emergency rule. His subsequent ouster and arrest triggered huge demonstrations and violent crackdowns. Moves to reconnect citizens with state institutions, halt destructive political battles and lay the groundwork for deep reform are essential for stabilising Peru's politics.

Although she rose to power just over a year ago amid mass protests calling for her immediate removal, Castillo's successor, President Dina Boluarte, has crafted an unexpected truce. Formerly vice president to Castillo, a socialist firebrand, Boluarte surprised many by striking a pragmatic working arrangement with conservative factions in Congress, business elites and the security forces, thus far ensuring the country a degree of stability. Ferocious constitutional crises that pitted Congress and the executive against each other, which have flared periodically since 2016 and led to the demise of three presidents, have been stilled. Demonstrations are now sporadic. Although surveys show over 80 per cent of Peruvians think polls should be held earlier than the scheduled date in 2026, most politicians are hopeful there will be no fresh elections until then.

Beneath this surface calm, however, Peru is still wrestling with an array of grievances. In the southern highlands whose largely Indigenous residents have long felt neglected or mistreated by elites in Lima, resentment festers – not least at the violent deaths of dozens of protesters in those areas. Nationwide, public opinion is unremittently hostile to politicians, political parties and democratic institutions, many of which are seen as corrupt and self-serving. When politicians venture outside the capital, they are rarely sure of a warm welcome.

Public disaffection lies at the heart of the repeated outbreaks of political instability and unrest over recent years, which peaked in late 2022 and early 2023. Part of the discontent is rooted in economics. Following the hyperinflationary meltdown of the late 1980s, free-market reforms and fiscal prudence induced a "Peruvian miracle" of growth, buoyed by corporate mining and China's demand for commodities. Many Peruvians, however, never saw the benefits. Poverty remains high, especially in rural areas, while organised crime is thriving. For the 70 per cent of workers employed in the informal labour force – one of the highest rates in Latin America – job protections, adequate public services or any form of upward social mobility appear ever more remote prospects. The life-and-death consequences of a stratified employment market and extreme inequality became painfully conspicuous in the pandemic.

Many Peruvians were unable to stop working, while overwhelmed hospitals struggled to offer care. The long queues that formed for over-priced oxygen tanks encapsulated the state's failings in the eyes of many.

The frequency of Peru's political breakdowns and the unpopularity of its institutions, however, stem from more than real and perceived inequality or social injustice. Despite an acclaimed transition to democracy in 2000, Peru's politicians have become discredited and its institutions dysfunctional, both assailed by often credible accusations of corruption. Until Peru's Constitutional Tribunal released former President Alberto Fujimori from custody in December 2023 – in defiance of a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights – three former presidents were in a jail reserved for fallen heads of state. Corruption is not limited to Lima powerbrokers: local authorities in the country's farthest reaches have also been plausibly accused of malfeasance. Parties, meanwhile, have morphed into a fast-changing ensemble of makeshift forces, generally lacking identity and experience, and prone to fission: the 130-seat Congress is now divided into twelve factions.

Alongside this landscape of unfairness, graft and factionalism, the legal and political architecture outlined in the 1993 constitution, which came into force under President Fujimori, has played a major part in driving recurring instability. The constitution makes it easy for the president to dissolve Congress and for the legislature to remove the president. Fiercely opposed political forces have weaponised these constitutional procedures in their bids to thwart and oust rivals on flimsy grounds. Extremism on right and left, disputed election results, calls on the military to intervene and paralysis in much of the state became the hallmarks of bruising political battles under Castillo's government. His declaration of emergency rule can be seen as a mark of both desperation and democratic fatigue.

In effect, democracy as currently practised in Peru appears more effective at fanning hostility in society than at healing the country's fault lines and crafting policies in the public interest. Specific measures aimed at making the state and political institutions more legitimate and representative, alongside broader changes to the constitution, are essential, but Peru must be careful to build consensus before moving forward. Even though politicians seem hesitant to approve major reforms, they should take concrete steps before the next election to strengthen the party system, as well as impede the misuse of checks and balances. In particular, Congress should be encouraged to clean up and democratise political parties, rejig the constitutional articles that it has used as weapons against the executive (and vice versa), and consider re-establishing a bicameral legislature. Calls for more sweeping change to the constitution have also grown strident. But public opinion is divided over the merits of achieving limited reforms through Congress. Many want to aim for a total overhaul by convening a constitutional assembly.

Given that the prospect of root-and-branch constitutional reform could well aggravate Peru's social tensions, authorities and the public could as a first step look to the work being done by a variety of groups to bring the country's diverse social constituencies together in dialogue. Though still fragile, regionally based and in many ways experimental, these platforms show a way forward for a profoundly divided country. Foreign partners should support these initiatives, as well as help overcome participants' mistrust of national authorities so that, eventually, Lima can get involved

in these conversations. The aim should be to forge an agenda for political and constitutional reform that would have the support of broad swathes of the public, business and most of the political establishment.

The mistrust prevailing between Peruvians and their leaders is more acute than anywhere else in Latin America. At the same time, citizens crave a state that can offer better services and greater protection. Repairing the ways in which political forces compete with one another and undermine stable government is a vital first step on the way to ensuring that democracy works in the public interest – and not as a trigger of repeated turmoil.

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Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru

I. Introduction

After the precipitous fall of Alberto Fujimori's authoritarian government in 2000, Peru initiated what promised to be a new democratic era. A government led by Valentin Paniagua laid the foundations of the transition by releasing political prisoners, creating a truth and reconciliation commission to examine abuses committed during the country's internal armed conflict, and adopting measures to guarantee that elections would be clean and fair. Alejandro Toledo, who hailed from a humble Indigenous background, emerged as the victor in the 2001 polls.¹ A series of peaceful handovers of power from one president to the next continued for fifteen years, during which time the Peruvian economy grew at a steady clip, in large part due to soaring commodity prices and the assurances offered by economic policies that encouraged foreign investment and ensured balanced state budgets.

But the stability was not to last, and the grievances that had previously convulsed Peruvian society were to return. Although a succession of presidents handed over power after peaceful polls, all of them saw their popularity wither once in office under a welter of corruption accusations and a perceived failure to narrow Peru's glaring socio-economic divides. Political differences, meanwhile, grew more vociferous and increasingly detrimental to the workings of the state.

Part of the problem was structural. While the country undertook major reforms during the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, the constitution established by Fujimori in 1993 remained in place, with increasingly toxic effects on Peruvian political life. Following the disgraced president's flight to Japan in 2000, a series of measures sought to restore public trust in government.² But the predominantly free-market model (with its shallow social safety nets) laid out by the constitution was unchanged. Other holdovers were the single-chamber legislature, created at the expense of democratic accountability, and constitutional provisions empowering the president to dissolve Congress following two votes of no confidence in the cabinet (Article 134) and permitting Congress to remove the president on the grounds of "permanent moral incompetence" (Article 113).

The 2016 elections stood out as a watershed in the misuse of these powers. Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the former president, who had been jailed in 2007, and her right-wing political party Fuerza Popular (The People's Force), won over half the seats in Congress.³ But centre-right economist Pedro Pablo Kuczynski beat Fujimori in the

¹ "Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in Peru", Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (OAS), 18 March 2001.

² Julio Cotler and Romeo Grompone, *El fujimorismo: ascenso y caída de un régimen autoritario* (Lima, 2000).

³ John M. Carey and Steven Levitsky, "Fujimori's party already controls Peru's congress. Here's why observers are worried", *The Washington Post*, 3 June 2016. Alberto Fujimori was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2009 for his involvement in the killings of civilians at the hands of death squads. He was also found guilty in separate proceedings in 2007, 2009 and 2015 of corruption and espionage.

presidential runoff by a wafer-thin margin.⁴ The scene was set for a long, bruising fight between the executive and legislative branches, both of which rolled out all the legal and constitutional artillery at their disposal to thwart and eventually oust the other side.⁵ In the words of an electoral analyst, “a certain implicit agreement to respect the rules of the game broke down”.⁶

The country has since plunged into a cycle of deepening political conflict and civic unrest, aggravated by a chronic failure to address matters of core public concern – above all the COVID-19 pandemic. Six presidents have ruled over the past seven years, with only two of them, Kuczynski and Pedro Castillo, having won at the ballot box while the rest assumed power through the rules of constitutional succession. Neither of the two elected presidents lasted beyond his second year in office. When Castillo – a radical left-wing union leader and primary school teacher – won the 2021 election, political tensions reached heights previously unseen in two decades of democracy. Over the course of his administration, Castillo and opposition forces stayed locked in a permanent state of political warfare. His adversaries, backed by mainstream media outlets, accused the administration of inefficiency and corruption, repeatedly threatening to depose him on charges of embezzlement and treason.⁷ The president, for his part, insisted that his foes simply would not let him govern.⁸

The standoff reached a climax on 7 December 2022. Castillo addressed the nation via live radio and television to announce the dissolution of Congress and the installation of an “emergency government” until new elections for an assembly to rewrite the nation’s constitution could be held. Hours later, police arrested him for seizing sole power unlawfully; the same day, Congress approved his dismissal and swore in Vice President Dina Boluarte as the country’s first woman president. Over the following weeks, thousands of Peruvians took to the streets to call for Boluarte’s resignation and fresh elections, among other things.⁹ The protests were met with a forceful state response. At least 49 people were killed by security forces between December 2022 and February 2023, and thousands were wounded.¹⁰

nage, for which he was given an additional cumulative sentence of 27 years. “Alberto Fujimori: ¿cuáles son los delitos por los que fue condenado el exdictador?”, *La República*, 5 December 2023.

⁴ In the 2016 elections, Fuerza Popular won Congress by a landslide, securing 73 of the 130 seats. Kuczynski won the second round of the presidential poll by a margin of 41,057 votes, equivalent to 0.24 per cent of the total cast.

⁵ During Kuczynski’s administration, Fuerza Popular introduced two motions in Congress to declare Kuczynski’s “moral incompetence” and thus remove him from office. The first, in December 2017, did not garner the minimum number of votes required. The second in March 2018 was tabled for debate but had no practical effect because Kuczynski resigned before a vote could be held. Kuczynski, for his part, threatened to dissolve Congress.

⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, electoral expert, May 2023.

⁷ Congress accused Castillo of treason after he suggested calling a referendum to decide whether Peru should give landlocked Bolivia access to the ocean. “Tribunal constitucional peruano anula la denuncia por traición a la patria contra Pedro Castillo”, *France 24*, 23 November 2022.

⁸ “Pedro Castillo: “Me presentan como un monstruo. Soy el presidente del Perú””, *El Salto*, 7 February 2023.

⁹ Glaeldys González Calanche, “Is There a Way Out of Peru’s Strife?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 15 February 2023.

¹⁰ “Deadly Decline: Security Force Abuses and Democratic Crisis in Peru”, Human Rights Watch, 26 April 2023. Clashes were particularly violent in Ayacucho, where ten people were killed.

Against all odds, a year on from this spike of unrest, Boluarte remains in power thanks to a seemingly implausible coalition with conservative groups in Congress and business sectors, supported by the security forces. Peru now endures a “tense calm”, with isolated protests mostly in the south of the country, as well as numerous unresolved grievances that underpinned Castillo’s rise to power and which now fester in the wake of his departure.¹¹ “The day this blows up, it will be huge”, said a former top government official.¹²

This report delves into the social and political causes of Peru’s instability, its effects on peace and democratic institutions, and ways to prevent further turmoil. Its findings are based on research in Lima and the southern departments of Arequipa, Ayacucho and Puno, where Crisis Group conducted 92 remote and in-person interviews between February and December 2023 with former Peruvian officials, civil society representatives, academic experts, members of Congress, diplomats, and grassroots Indigenous and rural organisations. Women made up around 40 per cent of those interviewed, despite their under-representation in leadership roles, particularly in most sectors of government, media and academia.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, public official, Lima, April 2023.

¹² Crisis Group interview, former senior government official, Lima, 26 April 2023.

II. The Ascent of Discontent

Peru's recent bouts of instability are a manifestation of political and economic grievances that have built up over decades. Although the Peruvian economy has stood out in Latin America for its steady growth, that has not been enough to stave off social discontent, particularly given frustration with the unequal distribution of wealth and income. Broad swathes of the population are also frustrated with the government, political representatives and public services – in short, with most elements of the status quo. Recurrent unrest exposes the extent of disaffection as well as the strains on peaceful political coexistence.¹³

A. The “Peruvian Miracle” and Inequality

Financial institutions and economists long showered praise on the “Peruvian miracle”, referring to a period of constant high growth from the 1990s until 2014, when the commodity cycle ended and the economy began to stagnate.¹⁴ Free-market principles, openness to global trade and prudent fiscal management by the state constituted the bases for Peru to capitalise on the 21st-century commodities boom, which was largely driven by China's appetite for natural resources.¹⁵ Until recently, the “Peruvian miracle” appeared able to withstand outbreaks of political conflict. In the eyes of its proponents, it has brought great benefits to the country's poor. All the main macro-economic indicators, such as income per capita, employment rates, inflation, investment levels and poverty reduction, show that Peru has “undergone three decades of economic expansion and growth”, a former economy minister said.¹⁶

Peru's performance is all the more striking for how its trade and market-oriented economic model, enshrined in the 1993 constitution that gave the priority to the private sector over the state in meeting people's needs, followed an economic meltdown in the late 1980s combining a billowing fiscal deficit with hyperinflation. The country's recovery from this nadir cemented the free-market, small-state approach as official policy, regardless of the elected government's orientation.¹⁷

Guided by this ideology, Peru has both seen impressive growth and become saddled with extreme inequality and social stratification. While poverty fell in the first decades of the 21st century, around 5 per cent of the population remains mired in extreme deprivation. More than 70 per cent of workers – equivalent to twelve mil-

¹³ Noam Lupu, Mariana Rodríguez, Carole J. Wilson and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (eds.), “Pulse of Democracy”, Latin American Public Opinion Project, 2023.

¹⁴ The notion of an “economic miracle” first appeared in a January 2008 Central Reserve Bank report, recurring later in World Bank and International Monetary Fund publications. See, “¿Puede el Perú ser un nuevo milagro económico?”, Central Reserve Bank, January 2008.

¹⁵ As the world's second-largest copper producer, Peru benefited hugely from the decade-long commodity boom, largely driven by increasing demand for raw materials from emerging economies, notably China. China has been Peru's largest trading partner since 2011. Lapa Balbín and Daniela Florencia, “Perspectiva del comercio internacional de Perú con China”, *Revista N7*, December 2023; Thierry Kellner and Sophie Wintgens, *China-Latin America and the Caribbean: Assessment and Outlook* (London, 2021).

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, former economy minister, Lima, April 2023.

¹⁷ Alberto Vergara and Daniel Encinas, “Continuity by Surprise: Explaining Institutional Stability in Contemporary Peru”, *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2016).

lion people – are stuck in the informal labour market, the second highest rate in Latin America after Bolivia.¹⁸ In a third of Peru’s departments, the informality rate exceeds 80 per cent, while in rural areas it hits 90 per cent.¹⁹ Workers in the economy’s informal sector lack social security, employment benefits and the protection afforded by labour law. The pandemic’s economic shock waves have made conditions worse. Over nine million Peruvians are now considered by the National Institute of Statistics and Information to be poor, equivalent to 27 per cent of the population, while another 30 per cent are at risk of falling below the poverty line.²⁰ More than 40 per cent of children aged between six months and three years suffer from anaemia, jeopardising their future physical development.²¹

By far the most impoverished areas are to be found in rural and above all Andean regions, with poverty rates in the Peruvian countryside almost twice as high as they are in cities. In rural areas such as Cajamarca, Huánuco, Puno, Ayacucho and Pasco, over 40 per cent of inhabitants are poor, with women, children and adolescents among the worst affected.²² Inequality is far from solely an economic phenomenon – it also stems from ethnic, territorial and cultural differences that reinforce segregation and discrimination. As a result, the Indigenous population constitutes one of Peru’s most neglected and poorest social groups. “Poverty has colour, language and origin”, a woman community leader in Ayacucho said.²³

In critics’ eyes, the “Peruvian miracle” bears much of the responsibility for the failure to distribute the benefits of growth more evenly.²⁴ A union leader argued that it has “failed to encompass all social sectors”.²⁵ Despite recommendations from the World Bank and others, the Peruvian state failed to use its commodity windfall to improve the education and health systems or reform the tax base and public spending.²⁶ A student protest leader noted that “extractivism has not benefited the development

¹⁸ “Panorama Laboral 2022 América Latina y el Caribe”, International Labour Organization, 7 February 2023.

¹⁹ “Empleo: Cajamarca, Puno y Huancavelica son las regiones con mayor informalidad”, Radio Programas del Perú, 20 June 2023.

²⁰ “Pobreza monetaria afectó al 27,5% de la población del país en el año 2022”, press release, National Institute of Statistics and Information, 11 May 2023.

²¹ “Anemia en niños de 6 a 35 meses no se detiene: incrementó a 43,6% en el primer semestre del año”, *El Comercio*, 12 September 2023.

²² *Ibid.* Quechua, Aymara and native communities of the Peruvian Amazon account for a quarter of Peru’s population. Poverty rates among Indigenous people stand at just under 40 per cent. “Ministerio de Cultura: 38,5% de la población indígena vive en situación de pobreza”, *El Peruano*, 24 June 2022.

²³ Crisis Group interview, women community leader, Ayacucho, July 2023. The UN Development Programme has noted in Peru that “place of birth and ethnic origin still determine to a large extent access to basic services and development opportunities”. “Country Programme Document for Peru 2017-2021”, UNDP, 2016.

²⁴ Although accurate data is lacking after the pandemic, the World Bank in 2019 ranked Peru as the fourteenth most unequal country in the world. “Gini Index 2019 Poverty: Income Distribution. Poverty and Inequality Platform”, The World Bank Group. Regional disparities are among the strongest manifestations of inequality in Peru.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former government official, Lima, April 2023; union leader, Lima, July 2023.

²⁶ “Repensar el futuro del Perú: Notas de política para transformar al Estado en un gestor del bienestar y el Desarrollo”, World Bank, August 2021.

of communities”.²⁷ The mining industry – whose output accounts for roughly 10 per cent of Peru’s GDP – has done little to help residents of regions such as Apurímac, Arequipa, Ancash and Cajamarca, where it is based, given that few of the revenues are distributed locally whereas the more harmful effects occur close to the mines.²⁸ Coupled with the environmental repercussions, the dearth of benefits to rural areas from corporate mining has fuelled a profound aversion to Lima as a bastion of power.²⁹

Free-market policies, broadly termed neoliberal by their critics, are highly controversial, as is the state’s flawed provision of essential public services. Related grievances have sparked recurrent uprisings in areas affected by large-scale corporate mining and contributed to former President Castillo’s unexpected rise. According to a former government official, Castillo garnered extraordinary support in mining and very poor areas, particularly in the rural Andean south, in which 90 per cent of the population backed him. “There is a huge problem with state performance. The farther from the centre, the worse it gets”.³⁰

Seemingly shielded from political turbulence, GDP growth had continued to rise before and after the pandemic. But over the past year, political turmoil appears to have dented the economy, with many firms grinding to a halt during protests, while the El Niño weather phenomenon brought floods that disrupted crops in the north and changed water temperatures, reducing the productivity of fisheries.³¹ Current estimates are that the Peruvian economy has grown much less than expected (the Central Bank revised the original forecast of 2.2 per cent growth for 2023 to –0.5 per cent in December 2023), while continued sluggishness in 2024 could undermine the post-pandemic recovery, hitting those already in dire straits the hardest.³²

B. *The COVID-19 Shock*

Governments and health systems around the globe were put to the test as they struggled to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Peru stood out for its deaths per capita, level of economic decline at the pandemic’s height and displays of unequal

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, student leader, Puno, April 2023.

²⁸ Studies have shown that the Peruvian state has emphasised extractive industries in a way that often ignores the sustainability of Indigenous livelihoods. There has been little consultation with local governments when deciding on mining concessions, meaning projects often disregard communities’ types of land use, environmental concerns or water management. Although Peru is a signatory of the International Labour Convention 169, which determines that governments must consult with local populations before starting mining projects to gain informed consent, communities frequently protest that they are ignored. Anthony Bebbington and Jeffrey Bury, “Institutional Challenges for Mining and Sustainability in Peru”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 13 October 2009. Norman Loayza and Jamele Rigolini, “The Local Impact of Mining on Poverty and Inequality: Evidence from the Commodity Boom in Peru”, *World Development*, vol. 84 (2016), p. 219.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, journalist, Lima, April 2023; residents, Arequipa, July 2023.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Lima, April 2023.

³¹ Fisheries account for approximately 1.5 per cent of GDP but saw a 26 per cent contraction in 2023. “Fenómeno del Niño: El impacto en nuestra economía”, *Gestión*, 1 August 2023. El Niño hunde en la crisis a la industria pesquera peruana”, *France 24*, 10 December 2023.

³² “El fin de un ciclo económico en Perú: recesión, baja recaudación y proyecciones negativas”, *Ojo Público*, 22 October 2023. “BCR: Julio Velarde da su primera proyección del PBI en negativo a –0,5% en Perú”, *Infobae*, 23 December 2023.

access to life-saving care. Then-President Martín Vizcarra confirmed the first registered case of the virus in the country on 6 March 2020, and soon thereafter the disease spread nationwide.³³ By mid-March, the government had declared a state of national emergency to prevent further contagion and ordered a lockdown, limiting freedom of movement and assembly, closing borders, and restricting various constitutional rights.³⁴

Peru was nevertheless unable to cope with the health emergency that followed. Hospitals rushed to instal more beds after their capacity of around 1,200 intensive care units was exceeded, but they were unable to remedy the shortfall in basic facilities. Peruvians with family members in hospital spent hours in line to buy oxygen tanks or resorted to a thriving black market, with tanks being sold for more than \$1,000 on social media and e-commerce sites.³⁵ A review in mid-2021 revealed that Peru not only ranked seventh in the world in COVID-19-related deaths but also had the highest mortality rate per capita in the world (665.8 per 100,000 inhabitants), with more than 210,000 Peruvians having lost their lives at the time.³⁶ The coast and southern highlands, particularly Lima, Arequipa, Piura, La Libertad, Moquegua and Tacna departments, were the worst affected; an estimated 1 per cent of the population of Lima died.³⁷ In a span of six months at the pandemic's onset, the nation recorded a death toll surpassing the number of casualties in its internal armed conflict spanning two decades in the late 20th century.³⁸

The pandemic revealed quite starkly the precarious conditions in which most Peruvians live. Social isolation measures, intended to mitigate the spread of the virus, largely failed to achieve the desired impact. Financial constraints forced many to continue working. The virus and ensuing lockdown also caused an unexpected mass exodus from Lima: driven by economic desperation and a lack of air and land transport, thousands left the capital early in the pandemic on arduous journeys on foot back to their home provinces. Known as *los caminantes*, or the walkers, these people underscored the vulnerability of many of those working in Lima but unable to earn a decent living there.³⁹

The failures in the country's response to the virus reflected both high levels of labour informality – making social isolation impossible for many people due to the absence of a safety net and the need to continue working – and historical underin-

³³ “Presidente Vizcarra dio a conocer primer caso de infección por coronavirus en el Perú e hizo un llamado a la población a mantener la calma”, press release, Government of Peru, 6 March 2020.

³⁴ “Gobierno declara estado de emergencia nacional y aislamiento social obligatorio por 15 días”, *El Peruano*, 15 March 2020.

³⁵ “Perú se enfrenta al avance de la pandemia sin suficientes camas de UCI, oxígeno ni médicos en los hospitales”, *El País*, 31 January 2021.

³⁶ “Covid: Peru more than doubles death toll after review”, BBC, 1 June 2021.

³⁷ Raúl Asensio (ed.), *El profe: Cómo Pedro Castillo se convirtió en presidente del Perú y qué pasará a continuación* (Lima, 2021).

³⁸ “La pandemia ya dejó en Perú más muertos que la guerra con Sendero Luminoso”, *Salud con Lupa*, 1 September 2020.

³⁹ Jorge Lossio and Mariana Cruz, *¿Qué hicimos mal? La tragedia de la covid-19 en el Perú* (Lima, 2022).

vestment in the public health system.⁴⁰ Investment in public health in the two decades prior to the pandemic averaged 4.75 per cent of GDP, one of the lowest rates in the region, and far below the average for Latin American and Caribbean nations of 7.2 per cent.⁴¹ Health institutions lacked proper infrastructure, equipment and personnel. A health ministry report revealed that 97 per cent of primary clinics were short of equipment and basic infrastructure, while in several regions facilities were simply unable to operate.⁴² It is not uncommon for hospitals in Peru to sit half-built and empty: in the coastal city of Chala, in Arequipa, a hospital has been in limbo for seven years. Despite never having been operational, its equipment is already technically obsolete or nearing expiry.⁴³

The emergency response of the central state was further weakened by political upheavals. In the span of a single week in mid-November 2020, Peru had three presidents, while eight health ministers served between April 2020 and April 2022.⁴⁴

C. *The Rise of Protest Movements and Castillo's Emergence*

Peru has seen frequent protests since the return of democracy following Fujimori's demise, but the nature of these upheavals has evolved. Environmental conflicts, primarily triggered by mining activity, have long been a common occurrence: even at the height of Peru's boom a decade ago, there were 200 active disputes between mining companies and local communities.⁴⁵ A former senior government official who worked for two years seeking to defuse environmental protests observed that such conflicts, which often drew in the state as well, were a constant headache.⁴⁶ Among the most well-known protests were those against the Tía María copper mine in Arequipa in 2011 and 2015, as well as the Aymarazo movement in 2011, which left at least five people dead and saw road blockades and attacks on government buildings.⁴⁷

Since 2016, however, a new kind of protest has taken centre stage. Confrontation between the legislative and the executive branches and between different political movements has given rise to protest waves that often spread nationwide, involve mass mobilisation and spur violent crackdowns by the security forces. In the aftermath of

⁴⁰ "Tres de cada cuatro peruanos con empleo están en situación de informalidad", *El Comercio*, 29 May 2023.

⁴¹ Current health expenditure (per cent of GDP), World Bank database.

⁴² "Análisis de situación de salud del Perú", Ministry of Health, March 2023.

⁴³ "Arequipa: hospital de Chala sin terminar en 7 años y equipos se malogran", *Diario Correo*, 24 February 2023. A similar fate befell the Antonio Lorena Hospital in Cusco. Over 2,500 state infrastructure projects worth \$7 billion had reportedly been stalled by 2023 due to mismanagement. See Joshua Goodman, "Turmoil risks financial stability Peru long took for granted", AP, 6 February 2023.

⁴⁴ "Peru sees 3 presidents in the span of a week", NPR, 17 November 2020; "Un nuevo ministro de salud asume en el Perú, el octavo en pandemia", *Barron's*, 7 April 2022.

⁴⁵ "Peru's protesters test Humala", *Financial Times*, 14 November 2011.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Lima, April 2023.

⁴⁷ The Aymarazo took place in the Puno region between May and June 2011, following a government decree authorising the operations of the Bear Creek Mining Corporation and its Santa Ana mining project in the district of Huacullani, Chucuito province. The regions of Puno, Arequipa, Moquegua and Tacna account for over 35 per cent of social conflicts in Peru, most of which are related to mining activity. "32° Informe del Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros del Perú: primer semestre del 2023", Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Peru, July 2023, p. 61.

Kuczynski's resignation from the presidency in March 2018, which he attributed to a stream of attacks from Congress led by *fujimorismo*, thousands of Peruvians flooded the streets of Lima to call for new elections.⁴⁸ Hundreds of demonstrators also thronged downtown Lima in November 2020 after Congress voted to remove President Vizcarra on grounds of his supposed "moral incapacity".

This move came after the attorney general opened an investigation into accusations that Vizcarra had received bribes while serving as governor of the southern department of Moquegua.⁴⁹ The marches continued for a week after Congress dismissed the popular Vizcarra and appointed Manuel Merino, until then the chair of Congress, in his place; they ended only when clashes with the police caused the deaths of two protesters. Merino's replacement after his resignation by an interim president, Francisco Sagasti, brought the country respite until a presidential election in April 2021.⁵⁰

Held in the shadow of the pandemic, these polls, and the runoff occurring in June, marked the onset of a period of extreme turbulence, exposing the full extent of Peru's political divisions. Castillo, the eventual victor in the elections, had himself gained a national reputation after leading part of the teachers' union protests in 2017.⁵¹ The first round of voting had been marked by high levels of indifference and extreme volatility in levels of support for the various contenders. Castillo not only managed to get through to the second round, but he also scored the highest vote of any candidates. His provincial origins, common touch and support from a nationwide network of teachers as well as activists from the left-wing Perú Libre party underpinned his breakthrough, enabling him to capture discontented voters even though his campaign rarely featured in the national media.⁵² His victory even caught some of his supporters in the south by surprise, a young woman leader from Puno explained to Crisis Group.⁵³

After a fierce battle with Keiko Fujimori in the June 2021 runoff, Castillo secured a narrow victory by 44,000 votes. Fujimori refused to accept the loss, however, claim-

⁴⁸ "“¡Que se vayan todos!”: masiva protesta contra la clase política en Perú tras la renuncia de Pedro Pablo Kuczynski”, *Infobae*, 22 March 2018.

⁴⁹ Vizcarra was governor between 2011 and 2014. His case is still proceeding. Anatoly Kurmanaev and Mitra Taj, "Peru president is impeached by Congress", *The New York Times*, 9 November 2020. "Martín Vizcarra insiste en anular acusación donde fiscalía pide 15 años de condena: ¿qué falta para que el caso llegue a juicio?", *El Comercio*, 18 October 2023.

⁵⁰ Marco Aquino, "Peru's new president sworn in, calls for calm after week of protests", Reuters, 16 November 2020.

⁵¹ Castillo, until then largely unknown, gained prominence through his role as the head of the Comité de Lucha (Struggle Committee) of the Peruvian teachers' union, which organised nationwide strikes in 2017. The protesters demanded higher wages for teachers and rejected a government proposal to fire teachers who failed a professional evaluation. Castillo represented the orthodox faction of the Peruvian left, which had been marginal in politics until the 2021 election. He established an alliance with a group called "Don't Mess with My Kids" (Con Mis Hijos No te Metas), which rejected state efforts to make schools more inclusive of gender diversity and strengthen sexual education. "¿Quién es Pedro Castillo, el dirigente que lidera la huelga de maestros?", Radio Programas del Perú, 22 August 2017. Crisis Group telephone interview, political analyst, Lima, December 2023.

⁵² Asensio, op. cit.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Puno, October 2023.

ing Castillo's win was due to fraud.⁵⁴ The threat of a coup also loomed, with a group of retired military officers issuing a joint declaration soon after the second round in which they claimed the vote was rigged and called upon the armed forces to withhold recognition of Castillo's triumph.⁵⁵ A flurry of legal wrangling and investigations held up formal proclamation of the final result. It was only a month after the poll that Castillo was declared the next president of Peru.⁵⁶

D. *A Violent Aftermath*

Castillo's government, which lasted for less than sixteen months, did little to win over his detractors. His term was marked by administrative turmoil: he appointed over 70 ministers while in power and placed family members in high-level jobs, resulting in multiple disciplinary investigations and attempts to impeach him.⁵⁷ His relations with Congress soon soured. Among over a dozen political forces, the leading party was Fujimori's Fuerza Popular, which adopted a stance of outright opposition. "The Castillo-Congress relationship was very confrontational. [He] had very anti-institutional rhetoric", a member of Congress told Crisis Group. "We got off on the wrong foot".⁵⁸

Even the president's loyalists found themselves disappointed by his actions and misdeeds in office.⁵⁹ That said, his impeachment and arrest were perceived among supporters as final confirmation that they would perpetually be denied the right to determine the country's fortunes.⁶⁰ Following Castillo's moves to dissolve Congress and initiate emergency rule on 7 December, he was thrown out of office by the legislature on the basis of "moral incapacity", replaced by Boluarte, and arrested on charges of rebellion and abuse of authority.

Mass protests erupted after his removal from office. "Castillo as president has committed crimes, and there were a lot of failings", a public official from Puno said. "That is the political Castillo, but there is a symbolic Castillo".⁶¹ The surge of unrest was – said a prominent local official – unprecedented in recent Peruvian history "in terms

⁵⁴ Fuerza Popular filed more than six complaints with the electoral tribunal alleging falsification of signatures and impersonation of polling station officials. An investigation by prosecutors confirmed that there was no fraud. The election results were ratified by election observation missions from the Organization of American States and the EU. "La fiscalía peruana desmiente el fraude electoral que denunció Fujimori para impugnar la victoria de Pedro Castillo", *El País*, 14 January 2022. "OEA y la Unión Europea avalan proceso electoral", *El Comercio*, 25 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Steven Levitsky and Alberto Vergara, "Tácticas trumpianas amenazan la democracia en Perú", *The New York Times*, 23 June 2021.

⁵⁶ "Perú: Pedro Castillo es proclamado ganador de las elecciones presidenciales más de un mes después de las elecciones", BBC Mundo, 20 July 2021.

⁵⁷ "Peru has an incompetent president and a discredited Congress", *The Economist*, 29 September 2022.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, member of Congress, Lima, July 2023.

⁵⁹ Castillo's support fell quickly. In August 2021, he had 38 per cent approval and 45 per cent disapproval ratings; by November 2022, his approval rating had dropped to 27 per cent and disapproval risen to 66 per cent. His supporters were concentrated in rural areas. "Estudio de opinión IPSOS", IPSOS, August, 2021. "Estudio de opinión IPSOS", IPSOS, November 2022.

⁶⁰ For an overview of what drove the mass protests, see González, "Is There a Way Out of Peru's Strife?", *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, public official, Puno, April 2023.

of its territorial extension and complexity, level of condemnation and the violent state response”.⁶²

Castillo’s electoral base, concentrated in southern and highland regions, considered the events of 7 December the culmination of efforts by Lima elites from the time he took office to oust him because of his status as a rural outsider, and the lowly social pedigree of his coalition of support. President Boluarte’s pledge to remain in office until 2026, and her alliance with right-wing factions in Congress, also stirred indignation, with the former president’s backers seeing her actions as a betrayal.⁶³ Protests gained the most traction in the provinces of Puno, Ayacucho, Arequipa and Cusco, getting staunch support from Aymara and Quechua communities.

Disillusionment with political leaders and democratic institutions extended well beyond the centres of protests, including in Lima (for more on dissatisfaction with the political system, see Section III below). A broad array of groups joined the protests, including trade unionists, students, farmers and teachers, as well as grassroots organisations including *frentes de defensa* (organisations defending regional interests) and *rondas campesinas* (rural patrol groups).⁶⁴ Women, particularly those from rural and Indigenous backgrounds, took centre stage in anti-government protests. “We women will be in the front line [in defence] of our rights and resources”, a farmers’ leader told Crisis Group.⁶⁵

These groups demanded, among other things, early elections, Boluarte’s resignation, closure of Congress and the convening of an assembly to rewrite the country’s constitution. The phrase “this democracy is no longer a democracy”, plastered on numerous banners, represented a common sentiment.⁶⁶ But the different outlooks of protesters, and the lack of national coordination, made it hard to press for any single set of reforms.⁶⁷

At the same time, the security forces’ heavy-handed crackdown and deadly clashes with protesters in the southern cities of Andahuaylas, Ayacucho, Arequipa, Juliaca and Cusco fed the cycle of escalating violence.⁶⁸ “The protest built up because there

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Puno, April 2023. A year before, she had promised to resign if Castillo were ever to be removed. “Dina Boluarte y el día que aseguró que renunciaría si Pedro Castillo era vacado por el Congreso”, *Infobae*, 7 December 2022.

⁶⁴ The *rondas campesinas* are self-defence committees in rural Peru. Their rapid growth came as part of the counter-insurgency effort against the Shining Path and Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, and they are recognised in Article 149 of the 1993 constitution. Following the end of Peru’s armed conflict, they have transformed into local security groups.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, woman farmer leader, Puno, April 2023. Mercedes Crisóstomo, “Peruvian women’s participation in contested politics remains active”, LSE Latin America and Caribbean (blog), 20 February 2023.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ayacucho People’s Defence Front leader, Ayacucho, July 2023.

⁶⁷ Efforts were made to achieve stronger national coordination, including establishment of the Comité Nacional Unificado de Lucha del Perú, or Unified National Struggle Committee of Peru, but these and other groups were undermined by internal divisions. Omar Coronel, “Ni revolución ni barbarie: ¿por qué protestan en Perú?”, *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 304 (2023). Crisis Group interview, Ayacucho People’s Defence Front (Fredepa) leader, Ayacucho, July 2023.

⁶⁸ Violence during social conflicts is not new in Peru. From 2003 to 2020, especially during socio-environmental conflicts, 167 deaths were attributed to the armed forces, with most of them going

was repression”, a Lima-based journalist explained.⁶⁹ At least 39 of the 49 Peruvians who lost their lives while taking part in the protests died of bullet or shotgun pellet wounds.⁷⁰ Boluarte, Prime Minister Alberto Otárola and other officials are under investigation by the prosecutor’s office for genocide, homicide and abuse of authority in the state’s response to mass protests.⁷¹

The unrest persisted for over three months without a breakthrough on bringing forward the date of fresh presidential and legislative elections (the protesters’ primary demand) or any other substantial concession by the government. Demonstrations eventually petered out in March 2023, largely due to the high economic cost of prolonged closures of highways and businesses.⁷² The government in turn withdrew the state of emergency measures in effect since the preceding December, although in Puno, the epicentre of the protests, these measures remained in place until September 2023.⁷³

But tensions remain. Unresolved political and social grievances continue to fuel discontent and deepen the breach between Lima and the regions. The central government faces a crisis of legitimacy, and its authority is vehemently, and at times violently, resisted by Peruvians. Rejection of the central state has risen in certain southern communities, to the point where locals have driven out government officials, forcing them to abandon the area.⁷⁴ In February 2023, for example, congresswoman Esmeralda Limachi from Tacna, a region in the far south of Peru, had to flee a town in one of the regions she represents after being pelted with stones by people calling her a murderer. Visits by top state officials to locations outside Lima have become rare: they require the state governor’s approval as well as robust police protection.⁷⁵

Demonstrations are now sporadic, but the organisations behind them, including trade unionists, Indigenous groups and protest victims’ associations, as well as grassroots organisations including *frentes de defensa* and *rondas campesinas*, remain

unpunished. “Fuerzas Armadas causaron 167 muertes durante protestas entre 2003 y 2020”, *La República*, 26 December 2022.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Lima, April 2023.

⁷⁰ “Deadly Decline: Security Force Abuses and Democratic Crisis in Peru”, Human Rights Watch, April 2023. “Crisis política y protesta social: balance defensorial tras tres meses de iniciado el conflicto”, The Ombudsman’s Office of Peru, March 2023.

⁷¹ “Fiscalía citará a 40 testigos más en investigación contra la presidenta Dina Boluarte por las muertes en las protestas”, *Infobae*, 12 September 2023.

⁷² “Ministro de Economía: “el costo de la conflictividad social fue equivalente a tres ciclones Yaku”, *Infobae*, 18 July 2023.

⁷³ “Gobierno peruano extiende estado de emergencia en Puno por 30 días”, *Swissinfo*, 5 August 2023. The state of emergency measures limit or put on hold the exercise of certain constitutional rights, such as the freedoms of movement and assembly, and suspend prohibitions on raiding private properties. They allow the military to support the police in maintaining order, including protecting critical national assets, public and private institutions, roads and strategic installations linked to the exploitation or transport of natural resources.

⁷⁴ “Puno: funcionaria del Minsa fue confundida con ministra de Salud y la echan de Juliaca”, video, YouTube, 15 June 2023.

⁷⁵ “Dina Boluarte en Ayacucho: más policías que población en actividad del Gobierno”, *La República*, 25 June 2023. Opposition has also grown to congressional deputies who are seen as having failed to defend protesters’ demands. “For me, [the congressional deputies elected by Puno] are politically dead”, a woman farmer leader said. Crisis Group interview, Puno, October 2023.

active, with different elements among them rethinking strategies and striving to build agreements on how to continue the struggle. “The embers [of protest] are still smouldering”, a social leader from Puno said. “This will not stop”.⁷⁶

That said, the protest movement faces its own challenges. Civil society organisations remain hobbled by their weak systems of representation and decision-making.⁷⁷ Whereas local organising committees have been effective, regional and national coordination is far from cohesive, while divisions within civil society organisations have prevented protest groups from reaching consensus on their most important demands.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, social leader, Puno, April 2023.

⁷⁷ While there are at least eight national organisations representing the interests of the Indigenous peoples, local communities often accuse them of being Lima-based and distant from grassroots realities. Crisis Group interview, woman artisan leader, Puno, April 2023.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ayacucho People’s Defence Front leader, Ayacucho, July 2023.

III. A Perpetual Political Crisis

In the eyes of many Peruvians, the country's political system is a failed enterprise. Many of today's problems trace back to Alberto Fujimori, who rose to the presidency in 1992 and consolidated dictatorial power in the office. Post-Fujimori reforms have created a fragmented, dysfunctional system. The perception that politicians are just looking out for themselves is now widespread, while dissatisfaction with the democratic system stands at 91 per cent – the highest recorded figure in Latin America at present.⁷⁹ Opposition to the current government is also running high.⁸⁰

A. Political Fragmentation

Peru's party system, which has been in decline since the late 1980s, has now reached a point of complete breakdown. In the aftermath of recurring military coups, the last of which took place in 1975, traditional political parties such as Popular Action, the Christian People's Party, the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance Party (APRA) and United Left provided a sense of stability.⁸¹ Together, they promoted a political agenda of greater equity and inclusion during the 1980s, under an economic model based on a mix of free markets and state intervention, enshrined in the 1979 constitution. But the failure of these traditional political parties to halt the country's economic meltdown – particularly during the first term (1985-1990) of the APRA's Alan García – and the threat posed by the Maoist guerrilla group Shining Path drove the Peruvian public into the arms of a virtually unknown new leader.⁸² University dean Alberto Fujimori was catapulted to the presidency in 1990 after his campaign vanquished the bid of novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, who had established strong support in the political and business elite.⁸³

⁷⁹ "Informe 2023. La recesión democrática de América Latina", *Latinobarómetro*, 2023. 80 per cent of Peruvians support new elections for president and Congress. "Que se vayan todos: un 80% de peruanos apoya adelanto de elecciones, según encuesta IEP", *La República*, July 2023.

⁸⁰ "IEP Informe de Opinión – Junio 2023", The Institute of Peruvian Studies, June 2023.

⁸¹ Peru returned to democracy following a series of military governments from 1968 to 1980, including seven years under the left-leaning Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces. Despite their differing ideologies, political parties and the military supported the 1979 constitution, which established the foundations for a competitive political system. Martin Tanaka, *Los espejismos de la democracia: el colapso de un sistema de partidos en el Perú, 1980-1995, en perspectiva comparada* (Lima, 1998).

⁸² García tried to control inflation and reactivate industry but had to rely on foreign loans to balance the books. He eventually sought to cap Peru's foreign debt payments, resulting in hyperinflation. Efraín Gonzáles and Lilián Samamé, "El Péndulo Peruano", *Apuntes: Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 28 (1991), p. 90. On Peru's armed conflict, see "Informe Final", Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003.

⁸³ Vargas Llosa was the frontrunner for the 1990 presidential election, offering a platform supporting free markets and structural reforms. Fujimori, a largely unknown agricultural engineer, surged in the polls late in the campaign. Portraying himself as an ordinary Peruvian and the son of working-class Japanese immigrants, his campaign slogans were "Work, honesty, and technology" and "Chinitos and Cholos" (names commonly used to describe Chinese and Indigenous people, to stress his distance from the Lima establishment). Fujimori forged alliances with evangelicals, informal workers, and the poor urban and rural classes. After a first round in which Vargas Llosa won 32 per cent and Fujimori 29 per cent, Fujimori triumphed in the runoff with 62.5 per cent of the vote. Car-

Fujimori concentrated power in the executive branch, capitalising on anti-establishment sentiment and a successful crackdown on the Shining Path insurgency through military and police campaigns, sidelining political parties from any sort of role in the state. After assuming full legislative and judicial powers following his 1992 “self-coup”, Fujimori presided over elections that same year for a constituent assembly and general elections in 1995, which together served to bury the existing party system.⁸⁴ In those polls, Peru’s traditional parties, with the exception of the Partido Aprista Peruano (Peruvian Aprista Party), captured less than 5 per cent of the votes and in consequence lost their registration before the National Jury of Elections.⁸⁵

Following Fujimori’s resignation, which was sent via fax from Tokyo in November 2000 amid a huge corruption scandal involving his closest ally and adviser, Vladimiro Montesinos, and in the wake of alleged fraud in the April 2000 election, a “representative archipelago” of smaller political parties emerged.⁸⁶ Since the transition to democracy, a new party system characterised by weak traditional parties, strong regional movements, newfangled groupings and start-up candidacies has driven political fragmentation to fresh extremes. Elections have since been contested largely by recently born or reconstituted political parties, often with minimal to no political programs. “There are currently more than 23 parties, some with dubious funding, and with no leadership and no ideas”, a former government official told Crisis Group.⁸⁷ Of the eighteen candidates who competed in the presidential election’s first round in April 2021, only five were genuine representatives of national political parties.⁸⁸

The reputation of parties as transient, opportunistic and unscrupulous has converted them into the country’s most discredited institution: under 3 per cent of Peruvians trust them.⁸⁹ Efforts to bolster parties and make them genuine representatives of public opinion have largely foundered. A referendum in 2018 succeeded in

los Iván Degregori and Romeo Grompone, *Elecciones 1990: demonios y redentores en el nuevo Perú: una tragedia en dos vueltas* (Lima, 1991).

⁸⁴ Arguing that Congress was curtailing his efforts to fight the Shining Path, drug trafficking and corruption, Fujimori moved in April 1992 to close Congress, suspend the constitution, limit rights and imprison political opponents, in what has been described as a “self-coup” or the “Fujimorazo”. “Peru suspends democracy, citing revolt”, *The New York Times*, 7 April 1992.

⁸⁵ As Fujimori consolidated his power, traditional parties such as the APRA, Acción Popular (Popular Action, AP), Partido Popular Cristiano (Christian People’s Party, PCC), and Izquierda Unida (United Left, IU) found themselves increasingly disconnected from Peruvians. In the 1995 elections, APRA secured 4.1 per cent of the presidential vote and 6.5 per cent of the congressional vote; AP received 1.6 per cent of the presidential vote and 3.3 per cent of the congressional vote; IU garnered 0.6 per cent of the presidential vote and 1.9 per cent of the congressional vote, while the PCC, having withdrawn its presidential candidate, only obtained 3.1 per cent of the congressional vote. The latter three parties lost their registration with the National Jury of Elections for failing to meet the minimum threshold of obtaining at least 5 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, Fujimori secured 64.4 per cent in the presidential vote and his movement received 52.1 per cent in the congressional vote. Tanaka, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Fernando Tuesta, *La reforma política: Ideas y debates para un mejor gobierno* (Lima, 2023), pp. 125-126. On Fujimori’s fall, see Julio Cotler and Romeo Grompone, *El fujimorismo: ascenso y caída de un régimen autoritario* (Lima, 2000).

⁸⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, former government official, May 2023.

⁸⁸ Asensio, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁸⁹ “Perú: Percepción Ciudadana sobre Gobernabilidad, Democracia y Confianza en las Instituciones”, The National Institute of Statistics and Information, May 2023.

banning immediate re-election of members of Congress, thereby limiting their terms to five years and preventing them from standing as candidates when their time in parliament ends. Then-President Vizcarra promoted this constitutional reform as a means of eliminating graft and abuse of power, but the move inadvertently paved the way for novice politicians with no legislative experience and no prospect of a lengthy career in Congress to seek public office for their own ends.⁹⁰ Many candidates now seek to join the legislature largely because of the pay and opportunities to find employment for family and friends.⁹¹

Authorities have also sought to make it harder to cobble together makeshift parties for use as electoral vehicles. Until 2019, the National Jury of Elections required parties gather a minimum of 700,000 signatures from supporters to register, giving rise to a “black market in signatures”.⁹² A change in the rules now means that the signatures of at least 24,800 members are required for a party to be registered.⁹³ But even this alteration has not inhibited the appetite to create new parties. Five outfits are now waiting for formal approval.⁹⁴ If they succeed, close to 30 parties will compete in the next polls, due in 2026, although fewer than half of them are likely to achieve electoral success at any level or manage to survive.⁹⁵

The fragmentation of the national party system and the plummeting reputation of parties have had damaging effects on national politics, and on the link between the central government and the provinces. Local elections, above all in the south, are dominated by regional movements and independent candidates, which are seen as closer to voters – although they are often as weak and volatile as their national counterparts.⁹⁶ National parties with representation in Congress largely lack a foothold at the regional and local levels: the 2022 regional elections saw independent candidates securing over 50 per cent of regional governorships and provincial and district town

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and politicians, Lima, July 2023; Crisis Group telephone interview, electoral expert, May 2023. Some analysts argue the ban was not necessary, since before it came into effect the re-election rate for members of Congress was fluctuating around 20 per cent.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, former deputy, Lima, October 2023. A deputy is estimated to earn roughly 15,000 soles a month in net pay, equivalent to around \$4,000. “Este es el verdadero sueldo de un congresista en el Perú”, *El Comercio*, 16 September 2023.

⁹² “Inscripción por el número de militantes fortalecerá a partidos”, *El Peruano*, 8 April 2019. “Más de 6.600 personas fueron afiliadas sin su consentimiento a organizaciones políticas”, *El Comercio*, 19 September 2023.

⁹³ “JNE: nuevos partidos políticos necesitarán al menos 24.800 afiliados para inscribirse”, *El Comercio*, 12 December 2019.

⁹⁴ “Partidos de Guillermo Bermejo y Antauro Humala buscan inscripción: ¿qué otras agrupaciones podrían registrarse?”, *El Comercio*, 3 July 2023.

⁹⁵ In the 2021 elections, 25 parties participated, but only eleven of them managed to reach the minimum threshold of 5 per cent of the vote. Congress is now contemplating imposing a requirement on new political parties that they secure endorsement from over half a million citizens, representing around 3 per cent of the electorate. “Congreso: cierran las puertas de acceso a nuevos partidos políticos”, *La República*, 23 November 2023.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, December 2023.

halls. “There are no bridges or mechanisms to connect large party structures and local grassroots”, a former government official explained.⁹⁷

B. *Surrogates and Turncoats*

To shore up their flagging fortunes, party leaders often offer their organisations as a platform for guest candidates who enjoy the support of voters and have the resources to fund a campaign. These are referred to as “surrogate parties” (*partidos vientres de alquiler*). “One needs candidates and the other needs parties”, wrote a reputed political analyst.⁹⁸ When Fuerza Popular won the 2016 congressional elections, only twelve of its victorious legislative bloc of 73 were party members.⁹⁹

This practice has favoured the entry into politics of figures who are often unqualified for public or legislative authority, while deterring others who lack political connections and local influence. Once the invited candidates have secured their desired posts, they feel little obligation to abide by the party line or program. Voters often grow disillusioned as the candidates they elected, originally affiliated with particular parties and ostensibly committed to certain programs and principles, sever ties with the parties, fuelling the public perception that these figures are pursuing their own interests above all else.¹⁰⁰

The effects are most clearly seen in Congress, where party hopping, known as *transfuguismo*, has become standard. By this practice, deputies routinely withdraw from party caucuses, move to different ones or create new factions. Or they are expelled from their original party and either stay as independents or join another party – a process in which both ideological differences and personal ambition play a part.¹⁰¹ An independent deputy, who entered Congress at the behest of a party, explained that the reliance on outsiders to run as candidates drives this recurrent splintering. “How can you call an independent a turncoat, right? If someone wants to participate in national politics, there is no other way but to run as a guest of a political party”.¹⁰²

Around a quarter of deputies have left the party for which they were elected in each of the last three legislative periods.¹⁰³ But the present unicameral legislature composed of 130 members stands out as the one that has seen more breakaways than any other in the 21st century: starting with nine party caucuses in 2021 and four independent legislators, a series of fractures have since given rise to twelve parliamentary factions and seventeen independents (these deputies now make up the second larg-

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Lima, July 2023. Attempts have been made in Congress to undermine the influence of regional parties, but they have had no effect. “Congreso: presentan proyecto de ley para la eliminación de movimientos regionales”, *Gestión*, 5 April 2023.

⁹⁸ Fernando Tuesta, *La reforma política* (Lima, 2023), p. 103.

⁹⁹ “Elecciones 2021: ¿Qué son los partidos ‘vientre de alquiler’ y cómo influyen en la crisis electoral?”, Radio Programas del Perú, 11 December 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Arequipa, July 2023.

¹⁰¹ For example, ten deputies with background in education all broke from the Perú Libre bench in May 2022. Their aim was to secure leadership of the Education Committee. “Congreso: en menos de un año, Perú Libre se fraccionó en tres bancadas”, *La República*, 12 May 2022.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, member of Congress, Lima, October 2023.

¹⁰³ “Transfuguismo político y cambios en la configuración de la representación parlamentaria”, Congress of the Republic of Peru, 28 September 2016.

est bloc in Congress). Former President Castillo's Perú Libre, the party that won the most seats in the 2021 elections, has lost more than half of its members in only two years, dropping from 37 members to twelve, enabling the opposition Fuerza Popular to become the largest party.¹⁰⁴

The overall effect has been to further undermine public confidence in parties and make it harder for Peruvian politicians to reach cross-party agreements on policy.¹⁰⁵ Efforts to clamp down on defections from parties have made little headway. Close to 40 legislative initiatives have been presented since 2001 with the aim of restricting defections and strengthening political parties. But several of these initiatives were struck down by the Constitutional Court on the basis that they violated deputies' freedoms.¹⁰⁶ A law was eventually approved in 2017 that prohibits the formation of new parliamentary caucuses, creating a mixed group that those who resign or are removed from their parties must join. But this change has made no difference to the numbers swapping sides since the Constitutional Court allows for defections based on ideological differences.¹⁰⁷

C. Polarisation

Alongside the discrediting of political leaders and disintegration of the party system, Peruvian public life has become subject to extreme polarisation. Elections are typically a catalyst for confrontation, and candidates have not shied away from undermining democratic norms if it plays to their political advantage. The 2021 presidential election and Keiko Fujimori's refusal to acknowledge defeat represented a high point of mutual antagonism, as noted above.¹⁰⁸ Her party Fuerza Popular, created in 2010 through a merger of different parties founded during her father Alberto's tenure, has contributed in large part to escalating political tensions over the past decade, converting successive elections into battles over the elder Fujimori's legacy and the free-market economic model established in the 1993 constitution.

The rising influence of extreme right and left-wing political forces, combined with the dismissal of ideological rivals as existential menaces to the nation, has since be-

¹⁰⁴ "Cambios parlamentarios: bancadas se diluyen, otras se crean e incrementa el número de congresistas no agrupados", *Infobae*, 11 August 2023. "Perú Libre vuelve a quebrarse: los detalles de las últimas renunciaciones y cómo la bancada se reduce a 12 integrantes", *El Comercio*, 26 July 2023.

¹⁰⁵ "Hacia la democracia del Bicentenario. Informe final de la Comisión de alto nivel para la reforma política", High-Level Commission for Political Reform, March 2019.

¹⁰⁶ "Transfuguismo político y cambios en la configuración de la representación parlamentaria", op. cit. In 2017, the Court declared unconstitutional a law that tried to modify congressional rules of procedure to stop *transfuguismo*. Congress then passed a law in 2018, which was ratified by the Court, allowing Congress members to leave their parties based on "conscientious objections" to ideological shifts. A new law on the issue was approved in committee in June 2023, but has not yet been debated on the floor. "TC: Congresistas sí pueden renunciar a bancadas por razones de conciencia justificadas", *La Ley*, 18 July 2018. "Congreso: Aprueban dictamen que busca evitar el transfuguismo en las bancadas", *Gestión*, 6 June 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group virtual interview, political analyst, May 2023. "Congreso aprueba polémica ley que prohíbe formación de nuevas bancadas", *Andina*, 14 September 2017. "TC: Congresistas sí pueden renunciar a bancadas por razones de conciencia justificadas", op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Ramón Pajuelo Teves, "Nuevos demonios y viejos redentores: Una elección en tres vueltas" in Asensio, op. cit.

come prevalent. Left-wing factions are repeatedly tarnished by critics as *terrucos*, a colloquial term dating back to the 1980s and signifying terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. The rhetoric of *terruqueo* was employed extensively during the 2021 election campaign against Castillo and his supporters, with the help of new media outlets such as Willax, Expreso and Radio Programas del Perú, one of the most important radio stations in the country.¹⁰⁹ In early 2023, moderate and progressive groups and protesters also faced accusations of association with terrorism. In one instance, Boluarte's first, short-lived prime minister, Pedro Angulo, declared that the Shining Path was behind protests in December 2021.¹¹⁰ Left-wing figures have responded in kind. Vladimir Cerrón, leader of the Perú Libre party, which backed Castillo's bid for the presidency, has propagated ferocious attacks on Lima-based elites while expressing admiration for Cuba's socio-political model.¹¹¹

Moderate politicians in general have faced some of the biggest challenges from polarisation. Both left and right decry liberal or social democrats as "caviars", a term derived from the French phrase *gauche caviar*.¹¹² "This designation has become a stigma attached to the progressive elite", a civil society leader explained.¹¹³ Cerrón himself has declared that moderates are his "main enemy". "We can agree with *fujimorismo* and others, but not with the caviar left. ... The caviars pose the greatest threat to us, a more dangerous enemy than the neo-fascist ultra-right".¹¹⁴ Figures on the right have also expressed a preference for aligning with the far left rather than with the caviar centre.¹¹⁵ As a former government official explained "the far left aligns with the right on the conservative agenda" in Peru, referring in particular to their shared opposition to same-sex marriage, abortion, LGTBQI rights and gender-sensitive policies.¹¹⁶

The fragmentation of the political system and the proliferation of small, fragile parties have created fertile ground for ideologues to whip up their devotees, particularly at the local level. Rafael López Aliaga, the "Peruvian Bolsonaro" and an opponent of abortion, same-sex marriage and the immigration of undocumented Venezue-

¹⁰⁹ In response to these accusations, Castillo said: "They don't care that the people don't eat, and that's why we are here, to get ahead and give dignity back to the people. ... The real terrorism is hunger, abandonment and corruption". Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "El terruqueo, el arma verbal que pone a los manifestantes peruanos en la diana", *El País*, 5 January 2023.

¹¹¹ "Vladimir Cerrón, el polémico neurocirujano que se ha convertido en actor clave de la política peruana", BBC, 25 August 2021.

¹¹² "¿Cómo nació el uso del término 'caviar' en la política peruana?", *El Comercio*, 3 September 2010. Criticism of the "caviars" goes hand in hand with rejection of a liberal political agenda that embraces human rights, gender equality and concern for the environment as an imposition by foreign forces. Crisis Group interview, political analyst, December 2023.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, July 2023.

¹¹⁴ "Vladimir Cerrón aseguró que su principal enemigo es la 'izquierda caviar': 'Podemos coincidir con el fujimorismo'", *Infobae*, 21 August 2022.

¹¹⁵ "Martha Moyano: Prefiero esta mesa con Perú Libre que un presidente del Congreso caviar o 'niño'", *El Comercio*, 25 July 2023.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Lima, April 2023. Women activists believe the conservative agenda is impeding progress on key issues, such as impunity for cases of gender-based violence. Crisis Group interview, woman activist, Ayacucho, July 2023. "Cierra el 2023 como el peor año de violencia contra la mujer: Lima y Arequipa son las ciudades con mayor índice de feminicidios", *Infobae*, 23 December 2023.

lans, is the most emblematic case.¹¹⁷ López Aliaga won the election to become mayor of Lima in 2022 for the Popular Renovation party (Renovación Popular) with only 26 per cent of the vote. Many politicians understand that it is only through fanning public indignation that they will get votes, even if the effect is to deepen polarisation.

D. Congress and the Boluarte Government

Boluarte took power in December 2022 against a backdrop of political upheaval, with few observers believing that she would last long in power. Even so, she has managed to retain the presidency through pacts of political convenience. Boluarte, who was expelled from Castillo's party Perú Libre the preceding January after saying she had never agreed with its platform, established a coalition with more conservative factions in Congress after taking office.¹¹⁸

The tug of war between the executive and legislature appears to have halted, replaced by a form of cohabitation between the former vice president from a left-wing administration and a Congress where the political right is ascendant. "In practice it is a co-government", a former government official observed. "Congress and Dina [Boluarte] govern together".¹¹⁹ "It is a perverse balance, but a very stable one", a Peruvian researcher noted.¹²⁰ Boluarte and members of Congress have a clear interest in a truce if they want to remain in power to the end of their terms in 2026.¹²¹ It may not be easy to maintain, however. Both the president and parliament are grappling with extremely low approval ratings. Disapproval of her government stands at 84 per cent, and at 90 per cent for Congress, and a large majority of Peruvians, almost 85 per cent, believe elections should be brought forward, a process that requires a constitutional reform that Congress must pass by a qualified majority, equivalent to 87 out of 130 deputies, in two consecutive legislative periods.¹²² Meanwhile, politicians have done little to address the escalating threats of climate change, environmental degradation and food insecurity.

In the eyes of many Peruvians, it is now Congress that is the real centre of power, with Boluarte little more than a figurehead.¹²³ Yet deputies seem unwilling to chal-

¹¹⁷ "El empresario López Aliaga, el 'Bolsonaro peruano', será el nuevo alcalde de Lima", France 24, 19 October 2022. During the 2021 presidential campaign, in which he had been a candidate, Aliaga called for the deaths of Castillo and Cerrón. "Rafael López Aliaga fue denunciado ante la Fiscalía por pedir 'muerte' para Pedro Castillo y Vladimir Cerrón", Radio Programas del Perú, 9 May 2021.

¹¹⁸ "Perú Libre expulsa a Dina Boluarte por declarar que nunca abrazó el ideario de ese Partido", *Infobae*, 23 January 2022. "Jo-Marie Burt: Dina Boluarte ha hecho un pacto con sectores de la derecha en el Congreso y con la fuerza militar", *La Mula*, 12 December 2022.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, former official, Lima, April 2023.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, social researcher, Lima, July 2023.

¹²¹ Bringing forward presidential and legislative elections, currently due in 2026, was one of the main demands of protesters in late 2022. Congress has debated several initiatives aimed at bringing forward elections, some to 2023 and others to 2024. None have passed. "¿Es posible volver a discutir el adelanto de elecciones generales en el Congreso de la República?", Radio Programas del Perú, 14 July 2023.

¹²² "IEP Informe de Opinión – Octubre 2023", The Institute of Peruvian Studies, October 2023.

¹²³ *Ibid.* When asked who holds the most power in the country, 35 per cent of Peruvians say congressional deputies do, followed by businesspeople (24 per cent) and Boluarte (19 per cent).

lenge her presidency, worrying that a confrontation could jeopardise their position by opening the way to new elections.¹²⁴

Congress also has greater priorities than sparring with the executive, and a large part of the legislature's energy over the last year appears to have been directed at disciplining institutions associated with Castillo's rise to power. For a start, members of Congress have spearheaded efforts to subject the heads of electoral authorities to impeachment.¹²⁵ Right-wing political factions, particularly Fuerza Popular, have long cast doubt on Castillo's victory in 2021, alleging fraud in the poll despite a lack of evidence. Since that vote, Peru's electoral bodies have found themselves under the critical gaze of factions such as Fuerza Popular, which has voiced concern about what it perceives as these authorities' lack of credibility.¹²⁶ The head of Peru's National Jury of Elections, Jorge Luis Salas Arenas, has denounced an assault on the electoral system, asserting that part of Congress "wants control of the National Election Jury through fear of impeachment".¹²⁷

Some members of Congress have also engaged in an offensive against parts of the justice system. While this campaign in some respects is part of the backlash against former president Castillo, the goal appears to be to undermine the separation of powers and help shield deputies from criminal investigations. In June 2023, Congress dismissed former Attorney General Zoraida Ávalos, who was also banned from holding public office for five years, on the basis of alleged delays in initiating investigations of Castillo.¹²⁸

Patricia Benavides, Ávalos's replacement, lasted briefly in her post: she was suspended for six months by the National Justice Board in December 2023.¹²⁹ A judicial investigation accused Benavides of colluding with around one third of congressional deputies, including representatives from factions on the right and left, in an alleged influence peddling scandal. According to the accusations, Benavides offered members of Congress to halt corruption investigations against them in exchange for support in her efforts to dismiss the heads of the National Justice Board – the body

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, member of Congress, Lima, July 2023.

¹²⁵ Six proposals have been tabled before Congress to make electoral authorities subject to impeachment proceedings, enabling the heads of these bodies to be prosecuted and sanctioned by Congress for misconduct. "La ruta del Congreso que pone en jaque la autonomía de los organismos electorales", *Ojo Público*, 25 June 2023.

¹²⁶ "Elecciones en Perú: el partido de Fujimori pide la nulidad de 200.000 votos cuando el conteo en Perú favorece a Castillo por un estrecho margen", BBC, 10 June 2021.

¹²⁷ "Presidente de Jurado Nacional de Elecciones peruano advierte "grave riesgo para la democracia" por acciones del Congreso", CNN, 6 July 2023.

¹²⁸ "Moción de Orden del Día 7565", Congress of the Republic of Peru, 7 September 2023.

¹²⁹ The National Justice Board suspended Attorney General Patricia Benavides for a period of six months on 7 December based on evidence found during a probe by the Special Team of Prosecutors against Corruption of Power and the National Police. Benavides is also being investigated by the Board for allegedly having removed prosecutors in an irregular manner. She also faces an investigation by the Supreme Prosecutor's Office Specialised in Crimes Committed by Public Officials for the crimes of criminal organisation and influence peddling. "Nuevo proceso contra Patricia Benavides y su hermana: JNJ las investiga por remoción de fiscales", *Infobae*, 26 January 2023. "Patricia Benavides: Fiscalía abre investigación contra exfiscal de la Nación por organización criminal", *Infobae*, 9 January 2023. "Las evidencias que vinculan a Patricia Benavides con una presunta organización criminal en la fiscalía", *Ojo Público*, 3 December 2023.

charged with oversight of the judicial system – and appoint a new ombudsman, closer to the Boluarte administration, among other things.¹³⁰

Members of the National Justice Board have been subjected to successive attempts by Congress to remove them, so far to no avail. Right-wing sectors of Congress have been pushing since Castillo's removal for the entire board to be fired and replaced, to which the body has responded by denouncing an attempted "breach of the constitutional order and the balance of powers in Peru".¹³¹ The Board was accused by the legislature of issuing a statement in support of former attorney general Ávalos and taking other defensive actions. Then, their decision to suspend Attorney General Benavides amid an anti-corruption probe drew criticism from right-wing elements led by Renovación Popular, who argued it violated the rules due to her immunity from prosecution. Government officials, including Minister of Justice and Human Rights Eduardo Arana, as well as the UN, have expressed concern about the potential removal of the magistrates.¹³²

Other controversial measures taken by Congress appear to have buy-in from across the political spectrum, including supporters of the ousted president. Three factions, including Renovación Popular to the right as well as Cerrón's Perú Libre from the left, have called for Peru's withdrawal from the American Convention on Human Rights, known as the San José Pact. These parties argue, among other things, that the convention imposes restrictions on Peruvian sovereignty and obstructs the use of capital punishment for certain crimes.¹³³ Some legal experts, however, regard these proposals as unconstitutional, declaring that the power to initiate Peru's withdrawal from the Pact lies not with parliament but the president; they also argue that abandoning the convention could also have serious implications, denying Peruvians

¹³⁰ The appointment of former deputy Josué Gutiérrez as the new ombudsman has raised concerns about whether his office will maintain its autonomy in reporting on human rights violations. Formerly associated with the Perú Libre party, he lacks human rights expertise. "Al nuevo Defensor del Pueblo de Perú le falla la defensa", *El País*, 31 May 2023.

¹³¹ "Gladys Echaíz: ¿Qué plantea el proyecto que busca crear una institución que reemplace a la JNJ?", *El Comercio*, 20 January 2023. "JNJ rechaza moción de Renovación Popular que busca remover a magistrados por suspender a Patricia Benavides", *Infobae*, 8 December 2023. "JNJ rechaza amenaza al orden constitucional", press release, National Board of Justice, 7 September 2023.

¹³² "Ministro de Justicia sobre investigación contra JNJ: 'Las instituciones y la democracia pueden estar en riesgo'", *El Comercio*, 8 September 2023. "La separación de poderes es un principio fundamental para una democracia plena", press release, UN Resident Coordinator Office Peru, 7 September 2023.

¹³³ The latest proposal was presented in June 2023 by Montoya Manrique, a Renovación Popular deputy, and followed publication of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report on anti-government protests. Other concrete steps have been taken in this direction, as the Congress's Permanent Commission approved the creation of a High-Level Commission in December 2023 for the development of proposals for reform of the Inter-American Human Rights System. The initiative still needs to be discussed and approved by the plenary in the 2024 legislative period, which begins in March. "Dina Boluarte rechaza informe de CIDH sobre ejecuciones", *Deutsche Welle*, 4 May 2023. "Renovación Popular presenta proyecto para que el Gobierno denuncie Convención Americana de DDHH", *El Comercio*, 1 June 2023. "Congreso creó comisión para revisar el Sistema Interamericano de Derechos Humanos", *Radio Programas del Perú*, 18 January 2024.

access to international courts of justice – an avenue of recourse they might need if local courts fail them.¹³⁴

Critics and many Peruvians regard these moves as an assault on the state's checks and balances by a legislature that is both more powerful and more unpopular than ever.¹³⁵ The array of competing and often fractured interests within Congress, in this view, has not got in the way of deputies' collective interest in shielding themselves from future criminal investigations.

¹³⁴ "Congreso: ¿son viables los proyectos para retirar al Perú de la Convención Interamericana de DD. HH.?", *El Comercio*, 22 September 2023.

¹³⁵ A prominent human rights advocate in Puno said the locals perceive the coalition between Boluarte and Congress as a betrayal. "Marches in the south have been in response to the entanglement and complicity between the executive and Congress". Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, Puno, April 2023.

IV. Corruption in Politics

To the frustration of many Peruvians, political dysfunction goes hand in hand with corruption in politics. Corruption has been a persistent menace, tainting all governments since the transition to democracy, regardless of their political or ideological affinities. Expectations ran high that the restoration of democracy and the rule of law at the start of the millennium would cleanse the government and political system of graft. In the words of a trade union leader, “With the fall of Fujimori we thought there was going to be a change”.¹³⁶

Those expectations, however, were dashed. All of Peru’s former elected presidents over the past three decades have been accused of embezzlement, although only one, Fujimori, has been convicted.¹³⁷ Castillo and Toledo are serving time for corruption and other charges in the Barbadillo Penitentiary Centre, a jail used solely to hold indicted former presidents, while Ollanta Humala has also previously been held in the same prison.¹³⁸ Fujimori, for his part, was arrested following his extradition from Chile in September 2007 and released from the same jail in December 2023 after the Peruvian Constitutional Court restored the humanitarian pardon he was granted in 2017 by former President Kuczynski. The government permitted his release in defiance of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which had ruled that the pardon failed to comply with the state’s international human rights obligations.¹³⁹

Peruvian authorities were also enveloped in one of the biggest corruption cases in Latin America: Brazil’s *lava jato* (car wash) investigation and its offshoots.¹⁴⁰ A team

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, trade union leader, Lima, July 2023. Corruption during Fujimori’s presidency is estimated to have cost Peru up to 4.5 per cent of GDP. For a detailed analysis of corruption’s impact, see Alfonso Quiroz, *Historia de la corrupción en el Perú* (Lima, 2022).

¹³⁷ “Los seis expresidentes peruanos que están siendo investigados por presunta corrupción”, *Infobae*, 23 April 2023.

¹³⁸ Castillo is being held in pre-trial detention, accused of rebellion and conspiracy for his role in the 7 December events, influence peddling, criminal association and bribery, among other crimes. Kuczynski has a pending case for money laundering and criminal association. Humala served eighteen months in pre-trial detention in Barbadillo between July 2017 and April 2018 for the alleged crime of money laundering, while he and his wife are under investigation for irregular campaign financing and corruption. Toledo is being investigated for corruption and money laundering, and was extradited from the U.S. in April 2023. Alan García killed himself as he was about to be arrested on charges of money laundering, collusion and accepting bribes. Vizcarra is being accused of criminal collusion, abuse of power and accepting bribes. They have all denied the accusations against them. For more about the jail, see “Barbadillo”, a multimedia special published by the Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio*, 30 April 2023.

¹³⁹ The release marked the second occasion Fujimori had been sprung from jail: he was also released from prison in December 2017 after Kuczynski granted him a humanitarian pardon, but was incarcerated again in 2019, after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered Peru to review the legality of the pardon. Fujimori was to have served his sentence until November 2032.

¹⁴⁰ *Lava jato* is a corruption probe that started in Brazil but ended up implicating high-level officials across Latin America. An offshoot of the investigation involved the Brazilian company Odebrecht, then the largest contracting company on the continent, which paid hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes to secure public contracts in at least twelve countries. Although there are accusations that *lava jato* and ensuing probes were deployed for partisan purposes in Brazil, a practice known as “law-fare”, the investigation uncovered an unprecedented web of corrupt practices. See Fergus Shield

of investigative journalists revealed evidence of wrongdoing in public procurement contracts awarded to the Brazilian multinational Odebrecht in Peru and later, in 2016, published detailed reports analysing every contract the corporation won from the Fujimori to the Humala administration (spanning the years 1990 to 2016).¹⁴¹ The corruption racket involved more than 800 people, principally former public officials including ex-presidents, political leaders, former governors and mayors, members of Congress and business executives. Since then, Peruvians have considered corruption to be one of the country's main problems, along with insecurity and political instability.¹⁴²

The arrival of Castillo in Lima's halls of power in 2021 did not alter this state of affairs. During his administration, Castillo was subject to six corruption investigations by the prosecutor's office, all of which remain under way while he is in pre-trial detention. One of the cases involves alleged payments to a group of deputies in Congress for their political support.¹⁴³ In 2022 alone, the country suffered economic losses estimated at around 25 billion Peruvian soles (equivalent to \$6 billion) due to corruption and misconduct, according to the Comptroller General. Almost half of the total was attributed to graft in the national government, including the executive, legislative and judicial branches, while the rest was reportedly siphoned off from regional and local governments.¹⁴⁴

Local and regional corruption is rampant. By the end of their term of office in 2022, all regional governors had active judicial probes against them, with 70 per cent of the cases involving investigations for corruption.¹⁴⁵ Ten of the 25 regional governors did not finish their terms: regional authorities suspended two of them from their post following guilty verdicts and two went into hiding, while six more were remanded in custody while in office.¹⁴⁶

The new generation of governors elected in October 2022 hardly looks more promising. A few weeks after the first-round vote, the Ombudsman's office warned that thirteen of the sixteen elected governors were embroiled in corruption cases.¹⁴⁷ A local leader in Ayacucho noted that the state governor had been elected for a third term, despite having been in jail for over a year on corruption charges.¹⁴⁸

Peru's judicial system, above all its prosecutors, has been applauded for combating corruption, but political parties exploit the investigations to besmirch their

and Sasha Cavkin, "Bribery Division: What is Odebrecht? Who is Involved?", International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 25 June 2019.

¹⁴¹ "Los contratos de Odebrecht en Perú", IDL Reporteros, 21 March 2016.

¹⁴² Latinobarómetro database (2004-2020).

¹⁴³ "Poder Judicial ratifica 36 meses de prisión preventiva contra Pedro Castillo", *El Peruano*, 31 March 2023. "Congreso: 27 legisladores con denuncias en Comisión de Ética y Subcomisión de Acusaciones Constitucionales", *La República*, 10 August 2023.

¹⁴⁴ "Contraloría: Perú perdió más de S/25,000 millones por corrupción de autoridad el 2022", *Gestión*, 30 January 2023.

¹⁴⁵ "Corrupción descentralizada: 84% de gobernadores regionales son investigados", *Ojo Público*, 20 September 2022.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ "Defensoría del Pueblo: 81 % de virtuales gobernadores regionales se encuentran involucrados en casos de corrupción en trámite", Ombudsman's office, 31 October 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, woman activist, Ayacucho, July 2023. "Por tercera vez Wilfredo Oscorima Núñez asume funciones como gobernador regional de Ayacucho", press release, Regional Government of Ayacucho, 1 January 2023.

opponents.¹⁴⁹ “The anti-corruption banner is supported [by political forces] so long as it is being waged against their opponents”, a Peruvian journalist said.¹⁵⁰ Regardless of whether accusations are well-founded or not, their use as a political weapon has exacerbated the public’s distrust of elected authorities.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, retired military officer, Lima, July 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Lima, April 2023.

V. Organised Crime and Politics

Political leaders sometimes blame organised crime for contributing to Peru's dysfunctional politics. During the protests following Castillo's removal, top government officials repeatedly attributed acts of vandalism, assaults on public institutions, road blockades and property damage to organised crime. Both Boluarte and Prime Minister Otárola pointed to what they saw as links between protests and criminal or terrorist groups, a supposition that authorities used to justify the heavy-handed crackdowns described above.¹⁵¹ But the picture is somewhat more complicated. While organised crime is a growing problem in Peru, and its links to politics are increasing as well (particularly at the regional level), the evidence for intimate ties at the national level is spotty.

A. Rapid Expansion

Organised crime in Peru, particularly illegal mining and drug trafficking, has undergone rapid expansion. The limited reach of the state in parts of the country and local corruption, as well as the emergence of new trafficking routes, have played a critical role in this growth.¹⁵² Illegal mining has emerged as the most profitable illicit business, spreading fast across the country, particularly in regions such as Puno, Arequipa, Ayacucho, Apurímac, Madre de Dios and La Libertad. Between 2021 and 2022 alone, 18,421 hectares were lost to illegal mining, a 120 per cent increase on the annual average between 2009 and 2017.¹⁵³ While it has not generated the violence seen elsewhere in Latin America, drug production and trafficking has also boomed. According to Peru's counter-narcotic authorities, the amount of land devoted to coca cultivation has broken all previous records, encroaching upon natural parks and Indigenous territories. Between 2018 and 2022, coca crops rose by more than 120 per cent; by 2022, 95,000 hectares were being used to grow the plant.¹⁵⁴

The Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro River Valley (Vraem), stretching across the departments of Ayacucho, Apurímac, Cusco, Huancavelica and Junín, remains the primary hub of coca production, but other regions such as Loreto, Madre de Dios and Ucayali, all in Peru's Amazon basin, have seen an uptick in cultivation.¹⁵⁵ Peru has consolidated its standing as the world's second largest cocaine producer after Colom-

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader, July 2023; public servant, Ayacucho, July 2023. "Alberto Otárola tras 17 muertes en Juliaca: "Aquí nadie se va a correr, recuperaremos el orden interno", *La República*, 9 January 2023. "Dina Boluarte pide una tregua nacional para entablar mesas de diálogo en Perú", video, YouTube, 24 January.

¹⁵² For analysis of the expansion of organised crime in Peru and elsewhere in Latin America, see Crisis Group Commentary, "Latin America Wrestles with a New Crime Wave", 12 May 2023.

¹⁵³ Between 1985 and 2017, 95,750 hectares were deforested due to gold mining in Madre de Dios. Between 2021 and 2022, an area equivalent to 20 per cent of the total deforestation over the previous 32 years was lost. "Minería ilegal se extiende en más de 30 distritos de cinco regiones amazónicas del Perú", *Ojo Público*, 17 August 2023.

¹⁵⁴ "Cultivos de coca en Perú se incrementaron en un 127% en los últimos cuatro años", *Infobae*, 14 July 2023.

¹⁵⁵ "Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2022", National Commission for Development and Life without Drugs, June 2023. Pamela Huerta, "The poorest narcos in the drug trafficking chain", *Infoamazonia*, 10 August 2023.

bia. Indigenous leaders often bear the brunt of this illicit trade: at least ten of the fourteen killings of Indigenous community leaders since 2020 have been linked to drug trafficking.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, community representatives and security forces in neighbouring countries, particularly in the Amazonian tri-border area with Colombia and Brazil, complain of complicity between Peruvian police and military and drug traffickers.¹⁵⁷

B. Close Proximity

Expanding criminal rackets have brought illegal outfits in close proximity to formal politics, particularly at the regional and local level. “The penetration of the criminal world into the state is a reality”, a security expert said. “Judges are bought by drug traffickers, there are mayors who have clear links with illegal groups. And there is also penetration in regional governments. But [the penetration] becomes more diffuse at the national level”.¹⁵⁸

In some cases, the results of illicit influence are physically evident. Illegal mining groups endorse and finance local and regional politicians who champion the business.¹⁵⁹ Such is the case in Madre de Dios, an area nestled near the borders of Brazil and Bolivia that has suffered extensive deforestation due to mining activity. There, a combination of corruption in state government, weak control of the territory, and widespread disregard for social and environmental regulations have left the landscape pock-marked by open pits.¹⁶⁰

As for connections between criminal groups and national politics, individuals linked to illegal mining reportedly funded part of the Fuerza Popular campaign during the 2016 elections and were later able to influence certain members of Congress.¹⁶¹ One of these deputies, Modesto Figueroa, represented the Madre de Dios region and was under investigation for allegedly financing and supplying oil to illegal mining operations. Figueroa contested the charges, though observers view them as credible.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ “Asesinato a líder indígena en Perú: ‘Estamos luchando contra los intereses del narcotráfico y lo que hacen es matarnos’”, *Mongabay*, 17 April 2023.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Leticia and Tabatinga, 10 October 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group virtual interview, public security expert, July 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Viviana Baraybar and Eduardo Dargent, “State Responses to the Gold Rush in the Andes (2004–2018): The Politics of State Action (and Inaction)”, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 55 (2020), p. 532.

¹⁶⁰ Bram Ebus and Ulrich Eberle, “Crimes against the Climate: Violence and Deforestation in the Amazon”, Crisis Group Commentary, 8 December 2023. “Deforestación por minería de oro en la Amazonía peruana sur: actualización 2021-2022”, Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project, 15 June 2023. “Case Study: Artisanal and Small-scale Mining in Madre de Dios, Peru”, USAID, October 2020.

¹⁶¹ Investigative outfit *Ojo Público* identified allies of illegal mining groups in various political factions in Congress, together comprising seven of the eighteen full members on the Energy and Mines Commission. “Visitas y personajes detrás de los proyectos del Congreso que benefician a la minería ilegal”, *Ojo Público*, 13 June 2023.

¹⁶² Former Environment Minister Manuel Pulgar-Vidal levelled accusations at Figueroa, saying he represented illegal mining interests in Congress. Figueroa has proclaimed his innocence, arguing that his income derives from lawful sources. “Pulgar Vidal: congresista elegido por Madre de Dios apoya minería ilegal”, *Gestión*, 22 April 2016. “Las transacciones sospechosas de Modesto Figueroa”, *El Comercio*, 20 July 2017.

Critics have also suggested that legislation enacted by Congress may have adversely affected efforts to combat illegal mining.¹⁶³ Criminal groups may also have exerted influence over or taken part in demonstrations at certain junctures in the unrest.¹⁶⁴ In Madre de Dios, the head of the committee tasked with coordinating protests was presumably linked to an armed group dedicated to illegal mining, although he denied the connection.¹⁶⁵ A criminal group in the north-western department of La Libertad involved in extortion and contract killings seized the opportunity provided by the protests to establish checkpoints along the highway, imposing fees on passing drivers.¹⁶⁶ But aside from isolated incidents such as these, judicial investigations have yet to yield concrete evidence of broader criminal participation.¹⁶⁷

Still, while the claim that criminal groups played a prominent role in orchestrating protests is questionable, these outfits may have profited from the political turmoil. Reports suggested that prosecutors' offices in the regions of Ayacucho and Arequipa were set ablaze in dubious circumstances in December 2022 amid the anti-government protests.¹⁶⁸ Some protesters have also acknowledged that they had identified infiltrators who seemed intent on inciting violence.¹⁶⁹ Several observers fear the combination of Peru's protracted political crisis, the disrepute in which state authorities are held and adverse economic conditions will bolster organised crime. "We are entering a more complicated cycle of violence, and I see no immediate way out", a former government official said.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶³ "[Congreso y Ejecutivo] están dando leyes que promueven la minería sin medir la conservación", *El Comercio*, 30 June 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, public official, Lima, July 2023.

¹⁶⁵ "La historia del minero ilegal detrás de las protestas en Madre De Dios que tiene lazos con Guido Bellido", *El Comercio*, 12 January 2023.

¹⁶⁶ "Extorsión y cobro de cupos en piquetes de carreteras: la historia de los 'peajes' paralelos", *El Comercio*, 28 January 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, public security expert, July 2023. Crisis Group interview, public official, Lima, July 2023.

¹⁶⁸ "Vándalos quemaron sede de la Fiscalía y el Poder Judicial en Ayacucho", *Diario Correo*, 16 December 2022. "Arequipa: Queman y destruyen sedes de la Fiscalía y del Poder Judicial en Camaná", *Diario Correo*, 13 December 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Puno, April 2023. Crisis Group interview, community leader, Ayacucho, July 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, former government official, July 2023.

VI. A Route out of Turmoil

Peruvian society is marked by profound social and economic divides that date back to the Spanish conquest and will not dissipate anytime soon.¹⁷¹ But the democratic system that was established to general acclaim in the early 2000s, in the wake of a decade of corrupt authoritarian rule, has failed to address public grievances. Instead, the periodic elections, procedures and constitutional controls of Peruvian democracy have become triggers for political standoffs and heightened hostilities between ever more polarised extremes. Outbreaks of unrest have progressively worsened as elected politicians lose credibility and popularity, while norms of peaceful political coexistence come under increasing strain. Reforms and bold steps in a series of areas are urgently needed to stabilise Peru's governing institutions and enable the country to tackle its deep-seated sources of tension.

Many Peruvians agree on the need to recast the political rules of the game and calls to rewrite the 1993 constitution in its entirety gained prominence in the late 2022 protests. But even some of the most fervent proponents of root-and-branch reform are wary of convening a constituent assembly at a time when factions at the political extremes could well gain the upper hand and draft a new charter that would struggle to gain public backing.¹⁷² Chile's failed constitutional reform offers a clear warning of the risks of pursuing that route.¹⁷³ Instead, steps to temper political conflict and ensure citizens feel properly represented by state institutions are vital to achieving stability in Peru, while dialogue efforts now under way could help form a basic consensus around what a new constitution with broad public consent would look like.

A. Political Reform

1. A near-term reform agenda

A consensus is emerging that reforms should aim to enhance the effectiveness of state institutions, bridge the gap between citizens and those in power, and end the country's cyclical crises. If the current government stays in power until 2026, it could

¹⁷¹ After Peru's war of independence from Spain, the nation-state was dominated by creoles of European descent, who resisted distribution of power and wealth to Indigenous or black peoples despite the fact they made up close to 70 per cent of the population by the end of the 18th century. Slavery in Peru was abolished only in 1854, 23 years after independence. For more, see John Lynch, *San Martín: Argentine Soldier, American Hero* (New Haven, 2009), especially chapter 8; Michael Reid, *Peru: Paths to Poverty* (Rugby, UK, 1985).

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, local leaders, December 2023. Several constitution-making processes in Latin America, including Peru in 1993, Venezuela in 1999 and Bolivia in 2007, resulted in charters that largely reflected the ideology of those political groups with a majority in the constituent assembly, contributing to further instability after the new constitutions were written. Renata Segura and Ana María Bejarano, "Procesos constituyentes y democracia: Claves para comprender el nuevo constitucionalismo latinoamericano", in Mikel Barreda (ed.), *Las instituciones políticas de las democracias latinoamericanas* (Barcelona, 2014).

¹⁷³ In the last two years, Chile has tried and failed twice to rewrite the constitution enacted during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. A first attempt in September 2022 saw a constitution drafted by a left-leaning assembly voted down. On 17 December 2023, Chileans again rejected a new charter, this time drafted by an assembly controlled by the right-wing Republican Party. "Chileans, offered left-right turns with constitution, choose neither", Reuters, 19 December 2023.

burnish its reputation by reactivating a stalled agenda of political reform and laying the groundwork for more stable and responsive government.¹⁷⁴

The priority should be a series of reforms that could in principle be passed through Congress in the short term to help strengthen the legitimacy of the party system. These measures could include regulating the formal registration of political organisations, establishing restrictions on party switching in Congress, enforcing party primaries – which were eliminated in January – strengthening anti-corruption controls within parties and ensuring congressional representation of historically oppressed populations, such as Indigenous communities.¹⁷⁵ Yet moves in this direction face a major hurdle: while there is public support for them, there is no desire for the current Congress to approve them.¹⁷⁶ Civil society groups from across the country and foreign partners who back reform could play a crucial role, both in persuading Congress to act and in generating public trust in any reasonable step taken by deputies.

Secondly, recasting the relationship between the executive and legislature has become an imperative given the troubles caused by rifts between them. The weapons used in confrontation between the two branches since 2016 are a series of constitutional articles that give each side the power to oust the other without much by way of due process: under the 1993 constitution, presidents can be impeached for the ill-defined failing of “permanent moral incapacity” (Article 113), while Congress can be dissolved after two no-confidence votes in the cabinet (Article 134). “There is no guarantee for a president”, noted a local leader in Puno. “It’s easier to dump a president than a doorman”.¹⁷⁷

Regulating the use of these powers while maintaining responsible checks and balances could help strengthen political stability. Advances in this area do not need to wait: although “permanent moral incapacity” is listed in the constitution as one of the reasons to oust a president, details as to its application are included in the Rules of Procedure of Congress. Changes to the precise meaning of “moral incapacity”, among other details, could be introduced by changing Article 89a of the legislature’s rulebook – and not a more convoluted constitutional reform.

This move could be reinforced by steps to decouple presidential and legislative elections, which have been conducted on the same day since 1920. Experts have argued that political stability would be better served if voters knew who the president-elect was (or at least the two candidates heading to a runoff) before voting for Congress. A decoupled election, they argue, would allow voters to make a clear choice

¹⁷⁴ For an overview of expert proposals on electoral reforms, political parties and the system of government, see “Hacia la democracia del Bicentenario. Informe Final de la Comisión de Alto Nivel para la Reforma Política”, op. cit. ; and Fernando Tuesta, *La reforma política. Ideas y debates para un mejor gobierno* (Lima, 2023).

¹⁷⁵ “Ejecutivo promulgó ley que elimina elecciones Primarias Abiertas Simultáneas y Obligatorias”, Radio Programas del Perú, 18 January 2023. Crisis Group interviews, Lima and Puno, April and July 2023. Moves to strengthen political parties and political representation have been put forward by experts on the High-Level Commission for Political Reform, as well as civil society representatives, such as the Citizens’ Coalition, a platform bringing together more than 300 organisations. Although political leaders acknowledge the importance of these reforms, they have received limited attention. “Nuestras reformas”, Citizens’ Coalition, 14 November 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, electoral expert, May 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Puno, April 2023.

between a party in the president's coalition or an opposition party, allowing for formation of more cohesive political forces and perhaps a more robust government with a working majority in parliament.¹⁷⁸ They describe the current arrangement as a "blind vote" that, because of the large number of parties in Peru, results in highly fragmented legislatures.¹⁷⁹

Two other potential reforms, which would allow for the re-election of deputies and the re-establishment of a second chamber in Congress, appear to have found increasing traction among political forces. A milestone in efforts to ease term limits – paving the way to the consecutive re-election of deputies – and restore a second house came in November 2023, when Congress passed a reform along these lines by a large majority; a second vote on these changes should take place in the next legislative session, beginning in March.¹⁸⁰ The two reforms, which could be achieved either through such congressional votes or by referendum, could help in the process of making elected officials more accountable to voters.¹⁸¹

Outside Congress, however, these measures have thus far proven far from popular. In 2018, Peruvians voted by a thumping majority against the immediate re-election of parliamentarians, in a move aimed at curtailing corruption.¹⁸² Both the public and experts fear that restoring re-election and creating a second chamber are exercises in the service of politicians' private interests above all else.¹⁸³ Such worries persist even though blocking re-election reform in 2018 seems to have backfired: with no incentive to perform well so as to earn electoral support, members of Congress often abuse their power and have arguably fewer incentives to work for their constituencies.¹⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the unicameral system established by the 1993 constitution, though seemingly preferred by most Peruvians, has concentrated power in the hands of a small number of deputies and made it easier for the majority to approve laws bypassing regular procedures, such as review of legislation in the committee stage.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Lima, July 2023. The proposal to hold parliamentary elections either during the second round of presidential elections (if applicable), or on the fifth Sunday following the first round, aim to reduce fragmentation in Congress. "Hacia la democracia del Bicentenario. Informe final de la Comisión de alto nivel para la reforma política", op. cit.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁸⁰ "Congreso aprueba volver a la bicameralidad y reelección parlamentaria: ¿cuáles son los principales cambios y qué viene ahora?", *El Comercio*, 18 November 2023.

¹⁸¹ Partial constitutional reforms such as these can be approved either by referendum or by a qualified majority – 87 of 130 votes – in two consecutive legislative sessions.

¹⁸² A constitutional referendum held in 2018 resulted in 85 per cent support for an end to re-election and 90 per cent opposition to a second chamber. "La bicameralidad debe ir acompañada de Primarias Abiertas para fortalecer la democracia, opinan expertos", Radio Programas del Perú, 23 November 2023.

¹⁸³ "[All political parties] are united by their interest in staying in Congress", a foreign diplomat in Lima explained. Crisis Group interview, April 2023.

¹⁸⁴ "It's their fifteen minutes of fame, and they use it to get rich", said a politician. Crisis Group interview, Lima, July 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Peru's legislature is relatively small for its population of around 33 million. For more details on the detrimental effects of unicameralism, see "Hacia la democracia del Bicentenario. Informe final de la Comisión de alto nivel para la reforma política", op. cit.

It seems, then, that for these new measures to overcome intense mistrust and earn public buy-in, political parties will themselves need to undergo the sort of reforms discussed earlier to buttress their transparency and credibility.

2. Considering a comprehensive overhaul

Advocates for a more comprehensive overhaul of the political system would go much further. They argue that the minimalist state with a limited role in economic development inspired by the 1993 constitution has failed to benefit the Peruvian people as a whole, or safeguard their rights to health, education and employment. Furthermore, the constitution is viewed by its critics as a pernicious legacy of Fujimori's authoritarian rule, as it was approved the year after the former president closed Congress and echoed his opinions as to the centrality of a free-market economy, as well as the limited role that should be played by civil society and political parties. For many Peruvians, particularly those in the protest heartlands, writing a new constitution would mark a symbolic rupture with a model of politics that has long excluded large swathes of society, above all its Indigenous population.¹⁸⁶

But caution is warranted before taking on a project of this scope. Recent opinion polls show the public is divided on the issue. Close to half those surveyed prefer partial amendments to the constitution, above all to those parts relating to the electoral system, checks and balances and political representation, while 34 per cent advocate a complete rewrite.¹⁸⁷ The private sector has voiced concerns that constitutional reform that reworks guiding the principles of economic policy could undermine growth and deter investment. Business leaders tend to back a more measured approach, suggesting that modifications be made within the confines of the existing framework.¹⁸⁸ Local leaders from the core of the protest movement, in regions such as Puno and Ayacucho, affirm on the other hand that convening a constituent assembly is their paramount objective.

Whether passed via a constituent assembly or through partial reforms, a successful effort to craft a new constitution with public and political approval is likely to depend on conditions that are not in place. Above all, Peruvians will need to agree on the legitimacy of those in charge of leading the reform effort and forge a broader consensus about the extent of the changes required.

B. *The Road to Dialogue*

Various constituencies in Peruvian society, including protester groups, Indigenous communities, business sectors, academics, and local and regional authorities, recognise the importance of dialogue in achieving a shared understanding regarding a constitutional overhaul that is desirable and feasible.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, National Unified Fight Committee of Peru, Puno, April 2023; public official, Puno, April 2023; Ayacucho People's Defence Front leader, Ayacucho, July 2023. "I Encuentro de Escucha y Diálogo", Arequipa, July 2023.

¹⁸⁷ "IEP Informe de Opinión – June 2023", op. cit.

¹⁸⁸ "Representantes de gremios y conglomerados rechazan la convocatoria de una Asamblea Constituyente", *Infobae*, 30 April 2022. Crisis Group interview, former economy minister, Lima, April 2023.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Lima, Puno and Ayacucho, April, July and December 2023.

From the onset of protests, attempts at coordinating talks between authorities and opposition groups have faltered over a lack of trust between them. Government efforts to address the causes of unrest began in January 2023 when Boluarte convened the National Agreement Forum (Acuerdo Nacional), which had played a pivotal role in dialogue and consensus-building in the post-Fujimori democratic transition, bringing together officials from national, regional and local governments as well as representatives from political parties. An eruption of violence in Juliaca on 9 January 2023 led to an indefinite postponement of the meeting. Subsequent attempts at dialogue were thwarted by road blockades, and more critically, by the refusal of local authorities and leaders – particularly in the south – to engage with government officials.¹⁹⁰

At present, any dialogue initiative led solely by the government is unlikely to achieve the legitimacy it needs among opponents, particularly in areas where the protests have remained strong, such as Puno, who would see it as an attempt by unelected authorities to silence their demands.¹⁹¹ That said, despite the many obstacles, local dialogues bringing together various groups, from business associations to labour unions and Indigenous communities, have made headway over the past year.¹⁹² A gathering in Arequipa in July, for example, succeeded in bringing together an array of groups and representatives to discuss solutions to the country's most acute problems.¹⁹³ While no agreements were reached, it served as a space to hear and exchange possible approaches to constitutional reform.

While broad and inclusive talks at the local level should continue, the UN and the EU should also continue to support issue-specific forums where civil society, government officials and political parties can debate potential political and electoral reforms, as well as responses to major public grievances, such as the provision of health care and education. The government has already shown a certain willingness to endorse these dialogues, with Boluarte herself declaring in July that “the aim is to find a convergence between social demands and the actions of the executive branch”.¹⁹⁴ Despite its setbacks in early 2023, the National Agreement later in the year initiated the first of a series of dialogues in Arequipa and Loreto. It should continue efforts along these lines.¹⁹⁵ Another promising step in this direction is a series of meetings, to take place in 2024 and 2025, under the auspices of the UN Development Pro-

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, public official, Puno, April 2023; National Agreement Forum representatives, Lima, April 2023.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Unified National Fight Committee of Peru, Puno, April 2023.

¹⁹² “Más de 100 organizaciones de Arequipa expresan sus preocupaciones y propuestas antes la crisis política del Perú”, press release, Coalición Ciudadana, 16 July 2023.

¹⁹³ The I Encuentro de Escucha y Diálogo was held in Arequipa on 12-13 July 2023 and brought together more than 200 participants, including leaders and social representatives from rural and urban areas of Arequipa, lawyers and relatives of victims of the protests, as well as sectors affected by and opposed to the protests such as businesspeople and farmers. “ProDiálogo participó en encuentro con organizaciones de Arequipa para impulsar una agenda ciudadana nacional frente a la crisis política”, press release, ProDiálogo, 24 August 2023.

¹⁹⁴ “Mensaje a la nación de la señora Presidenta de la República, Dina Ercilia Boluarte Zegarra, por fiestas patrias”, 28 July 2023.

¹⁹⁵ “Arequipa fue escenario del primer encuentro descentralizado del Acuerdo Nacional”, press release, National Agreement Forum, August 2023. “Alcalde participó de 2do encuentro descentralizado del Acuerdo Nacional realizado en nuestra ciudad”, press release, Municipal Province of Maynas, 3 November 2023.

gramme and with EU funding, that will bring together local and national state officials with representatives of the private sector, civil society and academia in several parts of the country.¹⁹⁶

Involving regional authorities and autonomous institutions such as local ombudsman offices could strengthen these initiatives. Local and regional political figures tend to enjoy more public support than national politicians, and so long as they are not too close to central government or involved in corruption cases, they could help guide these processes.¹⁹⁷ Other national organisations, such as the National Coordinator for Human Rights, a coalition of civil society organisations dedicated to the defence and promotion of human rights, could serve as a trusted intermediary between civil society and the government at a later stage of talks.

C. International Support

Foreign governments and international organisations should be ready to play a more prominent role in propelling dialogue, defending human rights and preserving democratic institutions. They can foster conditions conducive to national dialogue by endorsing embryonic local talks that bring together diverse social sectors, as well as by seeking to strengthen civil society involved in these initiatives by providing financial and technical support.

Foreign powers should also make clear their support for judicial investigations of protester deaths and press the government to adhere to the recommendations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other human rights organisations.¹⁹⁸ Securing justice and reparations for victims and their families could help restore public trust in the areas most affected by protests and encourage talks between national authorities and local leaders. The proposal to establish an Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts for Peru, backed by international organisations with a track record of defending and promoting human rights in Peru and aiming to provide legal assistance and support the design of victim reparation programs, could serve as an important confidence-building step.¹⁹⁹

Finally, foreign governments should seek to dissuade Peruvian authorities from launching further attacks on the autonomy of democratic institutions, such as Peru's National Justice Board and the National Jury of Elections. Undermining the independence of these institutions could cause grave damage to the credibility of future polls as well as the legitimacy of the judicial system, with potentially damaging consequences for what remains of public faith in political leaders.

¹⁹⁶ "Consensos hacia un nuevo pacto social en el Perú", press release, UN Development Programme, 21 December 2023.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, public official, Puno, April 2023.

¹⁹⁸ Peru's allegiance to the inter-American human rights system has come in for questioning in recent months, following the release of Alberto Fujimori, in defiance of the Inter-American Court, coupled with efforts to disengage the Peruvian state from that body and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

¹⁹⁹ "Peru: International Organizations Support the IACHR Recommendation to Create an Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts to Support Investigations of Serious Human Rights Violations", Washington Office on Latin America, 15 May 2023.

VII. Conclusion

Peru is enjoying a lull in political warfare, but the causes that have fuelled public discontent and ideological extremism have not gone away. Over the last five years, the ousting of presidents and outbreaks of mass indignation have become hallmarks of national political life. Public disaffection with leaders, state institutions, political parties and democracy in general are running at record highs. In areas that have received only a modest trickle down from Peru's decades of economic growth, perceptions of injustice – honed by the traumatic experience of the pandemic – drove a wave of support for the left, leading to the election in 2021 of Castillo as president. His downfall a little over a year later proved in the minds of many of his supporters that the edifice of state and business power in the country is tilted against the interests of the poor. For Castillo's opponents, on the other hand, the experience of his government and his failed bid to rule by decree demonstrated beyond a shred of doubt that it was a mistake to ever let him take power.

Tempering the divisions that course through Peruvian society is an imperative, but the first step in this direction should be to reform a political system that has lost most of its credibility and thus its ability to act as a safety valve for society at large. At the heart of reform should be efforts to end the multiplication and fragmentation of political parties, as well as to curb the pattern of destructive rivalry between Congress and the presidency. Polarisation between ever more radical versions of right and left may not be easy to counter given the ways that both have staked out their respective support bases. Dialogue across Peru's social divides, however, could help to frame a set of political and potentially constitutional reforms that should be embraced by elected representatives before the next polls.

There is little to show so far that President Boluarte's ruling coalition has the will to embark on the route of reform. But the circumstances that brought her to power revealed just how badly Peru's political order has corroded as well as how deeply and urgently it needs to be recast.

Lima/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 8 February 2024

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2021

Special Reports and Briefings

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

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The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

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The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

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The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

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Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas, Latin America Report N°100, 10 July 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Navigating Venezuela's Political Deadlock: The Road to Elections, Latin America Report N°101, 16 August 2023 (also available in Spanish).

Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap, Latin America Report N°102, 3 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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