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Protests mount in Peru with at least 21 killed by US-trained security forces

Peru's military and police, both trained by the Pentagon, have escalated their repression after the declaration of a national state of emergency on Wednesday and the imposition of a regional curfew on Friday.



Clash between protesters and police in Lima, Peru following the removal of President Pedro Castillo (Photo: VOA) [Photo: VOA]

The onslaught ordered by the newly installed regime of President Dina Boluarte, backed by Washington and the European Union, has killed at least 21 demonstrators. Videos show military battalions charging forward and shooting live ammunition, and police firing deadly tear gas canisters directly at crowds, including from helicopters, carrying out arbitrary detentions, and brutally beating unarmed protesters.

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While the initial demonstrations were triggered by the impeachment and arrest on December 7 of Peru's elected president, Pedro Castillo, who tried to preemptively dissolve Congress, the growing unrest has been triggered by a mountain of social grievances against the entire ruling elite, including inflation, mass unemployment, hunger, the highest COVID death rate in the world, generalized corruption, environmental destruction, among others.

The protests have taken the form of large marches, dozens of roadblocks and several airport occupations primarily by youth from the impoverished, marginal areas of the towns and cities, which are dominated by informality and precarious social services and housing. Major contingents from rural areas in the south, where the support for Castillo is concentrated, have also joined the demonstrations.

The largest march so far took place in Lima on Thursday, with tens of thousands demanding the resignation of Boluarte, who was Castillo's vice president, the dissolution of the Congress and immediate elections. A police rampage ensued in the evening, with cops brutally beating protesters, journalists, emergency workers, and passersby.

Boluarte has failed to appease the anger by promising to hold elections in 2024 and then 2023 and declaring to congresspeople "We are all leaving!" She even absurdly sent her condolences to the "mothers in Ayacucho," where her government has killed several teenagers for demonstrating.

Meanwhile, the state forces have tried to claim that the protests are being led by "terrorist and criminal" agitators. The police antiterrorism chief Óscar Arriola tried to criminalize the protests claiming that they have identified a handful of people linked to the defunct Maoist guerrilla movement Sendero Luminoso, Movadef, a group formed to seek amnesty for Sendero prisoners, and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA). Given the widespread nature of the social explosion, however, he was forced to effectively undermine his own argument by stating that "there are no leaders; this is a sui generis situation" and that "there is a class hatred in every behavior."

The far-right legislators who drove Castillo out of power are now demanding tougher repression. In the words of legislator Héctor Valer in a congressional session, "A grouping of people cannot push the state against the wall... These people deserve more authority and a tougher hand."

Applying victor's "justice" after the successful parliamentary coup against Castillo, the prosecutors and courts controlled by the far-right have ordered Castillo to remain in custody for 18 months. The ousted president and his former prime minister Aníbal Torres

were arrested together on their way to the Mexican embassy, when their escorts were ordered to turn them in. Castillo was denied a lawyer at the summary online hearing Thursday that ended with his prison sentence. Torres, aged 79 and the preeminent legal scholar in the country, has gone into hiding. Both are being vindictively investigated on the trumped-up charge of “rebellion,” which legally refers strictly to an “armed uprising.” Castillo, who had until now focused his pleas of defense to US imperialism, published another handwritten note on social media in which he declared, “The visit of the [US] ambassador to the [presidential] palace... was to give the order for deploying the troops on the streets to massacre my defenseless people and open the roads for the exploitation by mining companies...”

While the government and US imperialism ramp up the repression, the spontaneous character of the protests is being exploited by the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left groups to channel them away from any appeal to the working class in Peru and internationally and toward illusions that a new Constitution and elections within the same nationalist framework of capitalist politics will somehow resolve the urgent social demands of the youth, workers and rural poor.

The General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP), which includes the main miners unions, as well as those in construction, among metalworkers, and other sectors, has resisted organizing a strike and instead convoked a vague “national day of protests” on Thursday.

While denouncing the Congress as “illegitimate,” the CGTP leadership has actually worked to legitimize the regime that Congress and US imperialism have installed. On Tuesday, after meeting with Dina Boluarte, the chairman of the CGTP Luis Villanueva declared: “We believe that a bad decision was made but it has been corrected through a constitutional succession. However, we are facing a much stronger crisis. We believe that the decision is in the hands of President Dina Boluarte and the Congress.”

The meeting to legitimize Boluarte fully exposes the bureaucracy’s radical-sounding demands as merely an attempt to mimic the mood in the streets verbally only to divert the movement back into the dead-end of capitalist politics.

Similarly, the Agrarian and Rural Front of Peru, which includes a wide array of organizations, has called for a “popular insurgency against the neo-fascist coup” and the liberation and restitution of Castillo. However, their demands for a new “Patriotic, gender-equal, eco-friendly and plurinational Constitution” and new elections also seek to divert the protests behind the same capitalist framework.

This is the script their counterparts in Bolivia and Chile used to suppress the mass upheavals that erupted in both those countries in 2019. In Bolivia, the demand for new elections overseen by the US-backed coup regime only served to legitimize it and its killings of demonstrators, while maintaining the role of the military as the ultimate political arbiter. In Chile, a despised new draft Constitution—rejected at the polls—and the election of pseudo-left president Gabriel Boric have not resolved any of the issues around privatized pensions, education, inequality, and state repression that fueled the protests.

The discrediting of the entire political establishment—reflected in the demand “Throw them all out!”—poses the key question of what is to replace it and which social class will determine this? The election of another capitalist politician and drafting of another capitalist constitution will not resolve the crisis of bourgeois rule in Peru. It will only serve to politically demoralize, confuse and demobilize the masses as the local oligarchies and imperialism prepare to reimpose dictatorships under the supervision of the US-trained armed forces.

In Peru, the second-top producer of copper, the mines are owned by a handful of global corporations led by BHP Billiton, Glencore, Freeport, Teck and Grupo Mexico. Meanwhile, there are 37 Peruvians who own more than \$100 million and at least five billionaires. Democracy is impossible and corruption is an inevitable outgrowth under such conditions of inequality and imperialist domination.

As demonstrated by the response of all governments in the region to the pandemic and inflation, there is no limit to the deaths and suffering the bourgeoisie will inflict upon the workers and rural poor to create more profitable conditions for national and global finance capital.

The social and democratic rights of workers in Peru can only be secured through the mobilization of the working class independently of all pro-capitalist and nationalist politicians and trade union bureaucracies. A new political leadership must be built in Peru based upon the perspective of world socialist revolution and workers power, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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