



## Peru's Constant Cry for Change

Reform Rhetoric Wins Votes, But Can Presidential Candidates Deliver?

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WASHINGTON -- If there is one constant in Peruvian presidential politics, it is change. For more than 20 years Peruvians have demanded it at the polls -- and come April 9 they may get it once again.

As the election approaches, another outsider is leading the polls. Ollanta Humala, a nationalist former army officer, has emerged as a champion of change, a strategy also used by those who came before him.

Five years ago, Alejandro Toledo was the candidate of change. A conservative, pro-market economist and political novice, Toledo led the effort to oust the corrupt and autocratic regime of Alberto Fujimori. In 2001, he became Peru's first democratically elected president of Indian descent and, at the time of his inauguration, enjoyed a 59 percent popularity rating.

In 1990, it was Fujimori who was the typical outsider and man of change. A shy college professor, Fujimori was a political unknown who barely figured in public opinion polls just three months before his victory. In 1985, the fresh face was that of the charismatic Alan Garcia. Elected president at the age of 36, Garcia was widely seen as having a mandate to follow a left-of-center, pro-poor and anti-imperialist model.

These reform-minded candidates couldn't have been more diverse personally and ideologically. Yet, once in office, all three failed to meet the expectations of the population. Garcia's presidency was marked by four-digit hyperinflation, poverty growth and social unrest. As president, Fujimori became a strongman, starting with the dissolution of congress and the judiciary in 1992, only to see his rule end in corruption eight years later when his intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, was discovered bribing politicians and media owners.

Personal scandals and political cronyism turned Toledo from an outsider into a member of the discredited political establishment, sinking his popularity to below 20 percent for most of his presidency.

Despite establishing macroeconomic stability and an average growth rate above 4.7 percent yearly (among the highest in Latin America), Toledo failed to carry out a necessary reform agenda that, as Michael Shifter of Washington's Inter-American Dialogue puts it, would have made Peru's "political mood less angry, less frustrated."

With all this change and widespread dissatisfaction, it should come as no surprise that Peruvians have very little regard for democracy.

According to a United Nations Development Program survey released last week, only 18 percent of the more than 11,000 urban and rural Peruvians interviewed said they lived in a democracy. Thirteen percent said they would never live in one, and nearly the same amount considered an authoritarian government preferable. Two out of three blamed politicians for ruining democracy and more than three out of five said they did not care about democracy or knew how to define it.

Humala has come onto the political scene promising to increase the role of government to help the poor and to undo Toledo's economic reforms by opposing free trade, privatization and other neoliberal policies. A former army lieutenant colonel who has never held public office, Humala rose to prominence as leader of a short-lived military rebellion against Fujimori in 2000.

To his critics, Humala represents a jump into the abyss economically, and a potential Fujimori or even a dictator. Worse yet, Mario Vargas Llosa, internationally renowned Peruvian writer and former presidential candidate, has warned that the ascendancy of Humala and his ethnic ideology of *etnocacerismo* (a nationalistic movement that draws on Incan roots and an admiration for a 19th-century Peruvian president who resisted Chilean occupation) will mark the emergence of a new state-supported racism of indigenous people versus whites.

Humala is a wild card, no doubt, in a race that has drawn more than a dozen candidates, including Garcia. But just five years ago, it was Toledo who was accused of racism and exacerbating ethnic tensions by playing the race card in a country where more than 80 percent of the people are Indian or of mixed race. Toledo dubbed himself Pachacutec after the greatest Inca emperor, and traveled to the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu a day after his inauguration to be blessed in a traditional ceremony. It didn't take long, however, for Toledo to be "dethroned"

and turned into another unpopular and ineffective politician.

Humala is most disconcerting for what he isn't -- stabilizing and realistic. Throwing race into the mix of promises to renege on free trade, stop coca eradication and rethink foreign investment, Humala shows exactly who he is -- a rebellious leftist warrior with little appreciation for tolerance. In all likelihood, if elected, Humala would be an ill-prepared president who could leave Peruvians, five years later, to seek still more change.