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Corruption, Congress and COVID: Explaining the turmoil of the Peruvian democracy

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Shifting back to democracy in 2000, the Peruvian political success amazed many observers. Free and fair elections took place regularly, with political alternation. [The country's Growth National Income tripled over 15 years, between 2000 and 2015](#). Overall, the country triumphantly managed to go through the first fifteen years of the 21st century and appeared to have made its way towards a durable and liberal transition.

The November 2020's events depict a diametrically opposed situation; [the Andean nation has known no less than three presidents in the span of a week](#). In the month of December 2020, the situation has become increasingly tenser, with massive demonstrations taking place in Lima, overtly opposing Congress-led destitution of President Martin Vizcarra. Journalists even labelled it "[the worst crisis the South American nation has faced since the downfall of authoritarian President Alberto Fujimori](#)", as [two young adults died of police assault while demonstrating](#). How can a country which has been praised for its transition get to this point?

Enduring corruption at the helm of the State

Accusations of corruption are hardly a new phenomenon in Peru. [All of the 21st century-elected presidents were either put on trial or even convicted of these charges](#). Three of them are currently still entangled in [the corruption scandal involving the Brazilian Odebrecht construction company](#). This is what eventually led President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK) [to resign, in order to avoid a shameful impeachment trial](#), and leave the way to his vice president.

Martin Vizcarra, former Ambassador to Canada, was barely known to Peruvians before [entering office on March 23rd, 2018](#). This may have been the reason which enabled him to carry out ambitious anti-corruption reforms, facing fierce opposition of the parliament. Yet, he was not spared and was prosecuted for allegedly receiving bribes as a former governor, between 2011 and 2014, as well as [during his presidency](#). On November 10th, [despite outstanding popularity polls for a Peruvian president, Martin Vizcarra was impeached](#).



Martin Vizcarra, Peru's ousted president, speaks during a news conference at the Government Palace in Lima, Peru, on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Photo by Angela Ponce/Bloomberg via Getty Images

A "precarious democracy", leading to a divided Congress

The never-completed political transition of Peru led the country to be referred to as a party-less or as a "precarious democracy" ([McClintock 2019](#)). Parties in the country mainly gather around one candidate, and rarely survive the departure of their *protégé*. This high instability has a cost : according to the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, [65% of the population does not feel represented by any political party](#). The presidential election is not followed by a majority, and therefore,

often prevents the leader of the executive from taking action. Martin Vizcarra, [who intended to dissolve the Congress to reform it against corruption, was almost impeached in 2019](#).

The only permanent reference point of Peruvian politics is not consensual either: the imprint of Alberto Fujimori, former autocrat in power from 1990 to 2000, remains over Peru's politics. As Patricio Navia, professor at New York University points out : "[candidates tried to make up for the lack of political parties by developing negative identities – defining themselves as against fujimorismo, for example](#)." His former party, now led-by his daughter Keiko Fujimori, is the only landmark which seems to persist in Peruvian politics. Nonetheless, [she is the most unpopular candidate for the upcoming elections, embroiled in judicial affairs](#), which leaves the country's political realm without any anchor to look on.

Martin Vizcarra's impeachment had a resounding impact on the Peruvian population. [Unexperienced and divided, Congress faced its worst popularity record in 5 years](#). When Manuel Merino, President of Congress, was appointed as interim President, the population took to the streets.



Keiko Fujimori, daughter of former dictator Alberto Fujimori and presidential candidate, at a press conference in Lima on June 10, 2016. Photo by Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images

COVID and the upcoming crisis

The popular discontent is not the only thing the newly appointed Head of State will have to take upon. The country's Coronavirus outbreak is now [one of the continent's most dire](#), and no solution seems in sight. Mostly dependent on informal economy, many workers do not have any resources available to face the pandemic.

This economic discontent is vigorously expressed. [As Peru's GDP is poised to shrink by 14% in 2020, rebuilding trust in the current system may be impossible](#). As explains Omar Coronel, professor at the Catholic University of Peru, the [weakly-institutionalized Peruvian political class is what allowed the streets to oust Manuel Merino after 6 days](#). This may be enough to convince demonstrators to persevere, in order to demand reforms to the 1993 Constitution, which enshrined neoliberalism in the core of the country's economic model. Whether it will follow the Chilean tracks towards a constituent assembly for a new constitution is to be seen.



Francisco Sagasti, Peru's interim president, center, arrives for a swearing in ceremony in Lima, Peru, on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020. Photo by Angela Ponce/Bloomberg via Getty Images

After a somewhat chaotic month of November, the Peruvians' expectations are high. [62% of the population now believes corruption is one of the country's major issues - a 20% surge since](#)

[2013](#). When it comes to their regime, Peruvians seem to increasingly believe it is becoming a "democratic fiction", based on fictitious or incomplete representation by disconnected elites ([Guerra 1994](#)). If 66% of Peruvians still think of their country as a democracy, only 28% are satisfied with it ([Carrión et al. 2020](#)). As [President Antonio Sagasti now intends to bound anew with the people by forcing police generals into retirement](#), this may not be enough to spur long-lasting change. With 17 candidates for the April 2021 presidential elections, the society may as well remain divided while great challenges still lay ahead.