

# Peru: civil society conquers a sinister dictatorship

HÉCTOR BÉJAR

A video exposing all-powerful presidential advisor Vladimiro Montesinos paying USD 8,000 to a congressman for his vote unleashed a chain of events that ended in the flight and disappearance of the advisor, the escape of the president, and installation of a Constitutional Transition Government led by Valentín Paniagua.

Fujimori's government, which ruled Peru for ten years, fell in December 2000 in a revolution that was as spectacular as it was nonviolent. Fujimori had all the power. He administered USD 9 billion from the sale of public enterprises to private monopolies and USD 7 billion in loans from multilateral banks. He exercised power in alliance with the armed forces, subdued Congress, dismissed the Constitutional Tribunal, controlled the judiciary, paid millions in bribes to the media, used poverty reduction programs funded by foreign debt to gain votes from the poorest sectors, and occasionally had up to a 70% approval rate in public opinion polls.

Persistent investigation by independent journalists gradually revealed the bowels of his sinister power. The murder and butchering of agent Mariella Barreto, the torture that left Leonor La Rosa disabled for life, the use of the presidential airplane and the Navy's flagship to export cocaine, the complicity between military officials and heads of drug cartels, the falsifying of 500 thousand signatures to place government party members on the national election jury and similar activities, were uncovered by César Hildebrandt, Cecilia Valenzuela, Edmundo Cruz, Angel Pérez, Gustavo Mohme and other journalists who risked their lives and the lives of their families in doing so. High-ranking officers such as General Rodolfo Robles Espinoza, who recognised the existence of the mafia/paramilitary connection, were removed and persecuted.

## A rising civil society

Against this powerful government mafia, there was no armed insurrection and no bloodshed. Instead, there was a simultaneous mobilisation of journalists with impeccable investigative records, isolated groups of people who washed the national flag every day in front of the government palace, men and women who protested on streets and plazas throughout the country, human rights activists who attracted international public opinion to Peru, and women who risked attacks by the regime's police by going about in mourning dress. The Democratic Forum, the Wide Women's Movement, the Refuge Houses Network, the Civil Society Collective, the Human Rights Coordination, the Group of Women for Democracy, students, and hundreds of small autonomous organisations expressed their opposition in a myriad of ways, ranging from handing out garbage bags with images of the president and his adviser, to washing the national flag, to more traditional manifestations in public spaces. The culminating moment of this process was the "March of the Four Suyos<sup>1</sup>" on 28 July 2000. Convened by opposition presidential candidate Alejandro Toledo, this was one of the largest demonstrations in the history of Peru.

When Fujimori and his business and military associates decided to trample on the constitution once again by allowing the president to remain in power indefinitely, they underestimated the growing opposition within civil society, whose strategic allegiance with international solidarity movements is an expression of globalisation.

## The CONADES System

Civil society consists in part of what is now called the "CONADES System". The struggle for democracy has sometimes underestimated the importance of issues such as employment, nutrition and social rights. To place these issues in the forefront of the public agenda, the National Conference on Social Development (CONADES) began five years ago with a gathering of NGO networks to plan follow-up of the Copenhagen agreements. This organisation has grown steadily, creating links throughout Peru. What started out as a group of NGOs has today embraced youth, women's, union and popular organisations. CONADES includes 500 organisations, 30 specialised networks, 10 regional conferences, 7 permanent work groups, 7 subgroups and an Initiative Group (Coordinator) which is, at the same time, the representative for *Social Watch* in Peru.

The fifth CONADES, held in October 2000 in Lima, assembled 1,300 delegates from all over the country. It demanded the immediate resignation of then-President Fujimori and a rebuilding of the nation on a new ethical, social, political and economic foundation. Since the Fujimori regime was replaced by the Transition Government, CONADES has participated actively at the "Negotiating Table for the Struggle Against Poverty" that was formed by the new government. It has simultaneously supported the "Peru without corruption, so it never happens again!" campaign. Inside and outside the Negotiating Table, these organisations demand that the new economic policy also contain social objectives. With this goal in mind, CONADES is dedicated to building a "citizen watch" network that will monitor governmental policies and work with popular organisations for the exercise of citizen's rights, starting with access to information that the government must distribute.

## The social question arises

In the first round of presidential and parliamentary elections in April, the candidates Alejandro Toledo and Alan García defeated the conservative Social Christian, Lourdes Flores. Social issues, once largely forgotten, are now at the centre of public attention. The two candidates who face a run-off election both promise to promote employment, respect social rights, regulate private companies to protect consumers, and open the government to civil society participation.

Beyond their uncertain and imprecise government programs, the fact is that three-fourths of the country is disillusioned with privatisation and demands a truly democratic regime with respect for human rights. In the next few years, it appears that a new and wider space will open up for growing civil participation in the country's affairs. ■

Comité de Iniciativa de la Conferencia Nacional sobre Desarrollo Social  
(Initiative Committee of the National Conference on Social Development)  
<hecbejar@chavin.rcp.net.pe>

<sup>1</sup> Editor: "Suyos" ("suyo" in singular) were the administrative and political divisions of the old Inca empire.