Background- Peru

Peru is the third largest country in South America, after Brazil and Argentina, home to 30 million people. It is a developed democracy still grappling with a lingering legacy of repeated military coups, mistreatment of indigenous peoples, and severe human rights abuses committed during a 1980s and 1990s communist insurgency. It has the unenviable distinction of being, by far, the state appearing the most frequently before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Peru’s colonial period was marked by notably strong military control and brutal repression of indigenous populations. Spain conquered the Inca Empire in the 1500s but Indians repeatedly rebelled against Spanish rule, most notably under Túpac Amaru II, an Incan and Spanish aristocrat who the Spanish tortured to death for leading a 1780 rebellion. By the 1800s, Spain had firm control over Peru with a large Spanish population and military presence. However, the Spanish military presence threatened revolutionaries from the newly independent Argentina and Bolivia and they invaded Peru and declared it independent in 1824.

In the century following its independence, Peru gradually made progressive reforms but struggled with repeated wars and mounting foreign debt. After the Argentine and Bolivian revolutionaries departed, Peruvian military leaders engaged in an internal power struggle but ultimately established a stable military regime in the 1850s and a presidential democracy in the 1870s. From the 1850s to 1920s, Peru expanded voting rights, developed public education, abolished slavery, and introduced theoretical (if poorly enforced) rights for indigenous communities. However, the socialist Aprista party and the communists complained that support for the poor and indigenous communities did not go far enough. Additionally, Peru spiraled into foreign debt due to corruption and costly wars with Spain and Chile. The government only averted bankruptcy by agreeing to form a corporation that funneled much of the Peru’s economic output to foreign creditors, prompting additional complaints of imperialism.

Beginning in the 1930s, Peru’s economic woes spurred repeated coups, with power shifting between the military, the Apristas, and other political parties. In 1930, a military junta overthrew the president, provoking an Aprista uprising that left the junta’s leader assassinated, many Apristas dead, and the Aprista party temporarily banned. The junta restored elections in 1939 but overthrew the government again following an Aprista uprising in 1948, and then again in 1962 and 1968. Following the 1968 take-over, the military imprisoned its rivals, censored the media, nationalized private companies, and redistributed land to indigenous communities. However, Peru’s economy continued to worsen and, in 1978, the military re-privatized the economy and restored elections. Unfortunately, successive presidents from the Apristas and competing parties also failed to control Peru’s worsening economy and foreign debt and, in 1985, the International Monetary Fund imposed sanctions after an Aprista president announced that Peru would reduce its foreign debt payments.

By the 1980s, Peru’s economic conflicts had deteriorated into a communist insurgency during which both the communist guerilla group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) and the Peruvian government committed human rights violations against rural farmers caught in the middle. Led

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1 Caitlin Hunter, Author, Foreign and International Law Librarian at Loyola Law School; Erin Gonzalez, Chief IACHR Editor; Cesare Romano, Faculty Advisor.
by former philosophy professor Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, Sendero Luminoso assassinated officials, committed car bombings, and massacred entire rural communities that failed to cooperate with its Maoist reforms and extensive cocaine trafficking. Most brutally, in 1983, at the village of Lucanamarca, Sendero Luminoso members shot and hacked to death 69 people, including eighteen children age ten or younger. In an effort to suppress Sendero Luminoso, the Peruvian military and police committed extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence against communist insurgents and bystanders alike. Most notably, the military killed hundreds of prisoners during riots at the Lurigancho and El Frontón penitentiaries in 1986 and bayoneted thirty to fifty farmers in the chapel of Cayara village in 1988. Members of quasi-government paramilitary groups such as the Commando Rodrigo Franco also killed suspected left-wing activists, sometimes seeking to pin the deaths on Sendero Luminoso. The government made some efforts to end human rights abuses but also contributed to them by declaring repeated states of emergency, harshly prosecuting civilians in military courts under broad anti-terrorism laws, and largely failing to prosecute human rights violations by the military, police, and paramilitaries.

In 1990, Peruvians elected President Alberto Fujimori, who halted Peru’s economic decline and communist insurgency but also led severe human rights abuses. The president’s “Fujishock” austerity policies and privatization initiatives corrected inflation and boosted the economy but hurt the poor and included illegally firing and cutting wages and pensions for government employees. His anti-insurgency campaign captured Guzmán and largely ended the Sendero Luminoso movement but did so through arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, beating, rape, torture, disappearances, and murder of suspected insurgents and anyone else unlucky enough to be in the anti-insurgency force’ path. Most notably, the Grupo Colina death squad killed an eight year old,

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boy and fourteen other people at a barbecue in Lima’s Barrios Alto neighborhood in 1991 and killed nine students and a professor at La Cantuta University in 1992. In 1996, members of a separate and smaller communist insurgency, called Túpac Amaru, after the name of the last Emperor of the Incas, took officials hostage at the Japanese embassy for months before the military stormed the embassy to rescue them. Although most Peruvians lauded the military for rescuing the hostages, many were upset by controversial photos showing Fujimori casually walking past insurgents’ dead bodies and by reports that insurgents were shot in the back of the head after surrendering.

Throughout the 1990s, Fujimori gradually tightened his control on the Peruvian government and abandoned traditional democratic protections in order to consolidate his power. In 1992, Fujimori led the military in an autogolpe (self-coup) that dissolved the legislature, restructured the judiciary, and re-wrote the constitution. A few days after the coup, prison guards attacked suspected Sendero Luminoso members held at Miguel Castro Castro Prison, firing at the prisoners with bullets, tear gas, white phosphorous, rockets, and grenades. Dozens of prisoners died. Surviving prisoners were held in solitary confinement, sexually abused, and beaten, in some cases to death. In 1994, Fujimori’s wife denounced him and attempted to run against him for president. He allegedly had her tortured and replaced her as First Lady with their daughter, Keiko, then a 19 year old Brown University student. In 1995, Fujimori signed a law granting


amnesty to military and police officials accused of human rights abuses. When the Peruvian courts objected, he signed a second law preventing the courts from overturning the amnesty. In 1996, the legislature passed a law specifying that the new Constitution’s two-term presidential limit did not include terms begun before the Constitution was enacted, thus enabling Fujimori to run for a third term. When three judges on the newly created Constitutional Court rejected the law, the government harassed and ultimately impeached them, leaving the court with only four justices and unable to strike down any laws.

By 1999, Peru was facing multiple cases before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, prompting it to make a botched attempt to withdraw from the Court entirely. In July 1999, Peru announced that it no longer accepted the Court’s jurisdiction and, accordingly, would not be participating in two pending cases brought by the impeached Constitutional Court judges and by a reporter who had been stripped of his Peruvian citizenship for reporting on the torture of suspected insurgents. The Court rejected Peru’s attempt to withdraw as invalid and continued to hear cases against it.

Ultimately, however, it was not Fujimori’s human rights abuses but his corruption that led to his fall from power in 2000. In 2000, the media obtained what they dubbed the Vladivideos: recordings of Fujimori’s head of intelligence, Vladimiro Montesinos, bribing politicians to support Fujimori. As the scandal expanded, investigators discovered that both Fujimori and Montesinos had embezzled public funds and that Montesinos had sold assault rifles to Colombia’s communist insurgents, despite himself leading Peru’s anti-communist Grupo Colina death squad. An embarrassed Fujimori paid Montesinos $15 million in public funds to step down and Montesinos fled the country on his private yacht. However, the scandal continued to grow and Fujimori resigned by fax while visiting his parents’ native Japan.

With Fujimori and Montesinos gone, Peru began the process of investigating human rights abuses. In 2003, the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued a report exposing the human rights abuse committed during the communist insurgency and personally condemning Fujimori, Montesinos, and Guzmán for directing massacres and manipulating the insurgency for personal gain. That same year, Peru’s Constitutional Court ordered civilian courts to retry thousands of alleged communist insurgents who had been convicted by military courts, following a series of Inter-American Court of Human Rights cases holding that these trials were unacceptable. The courts freed over a hundred prisoners and re-convicted others, most notably sentencing Guzmán to multiple life terms for the Lucanamarca massacre and other crimes.

Peruvian courts also began trials of hundreds of military and police officers for human rights abuses, including Montesinos and Fujimori. Peru captured Montesinos only eight months after he fled, convicted and imprisoned him on corruption charges, then auctioned off his collection of diamond encrusted medals, cufflinks, and watches to support anti-corruption initiatives.\(^\text{14}\) Peru captured Fujimori in 2005, after he returned to Chile from Japan with plans to regain the presidency and, instead, found himself extradited to Peru to stand trial. Over the past decade, Peruvian courts have convicted him of multiple murder and corruption charges, with more charges still pending.

Although Peru has taken major steps towards addressing past human rights abuses, it continues to face criticism for various human rights violations. Peru has yet to fully comply with its obligations towards victims of the Miguel Castro Castro Prison massacre and prison conditions remain harsh.\(^\text{15}\) Most recently, Peru was sanctioned by the Court for indefinitely detaining a Chinese smuggler while deciding whether to extradite him to face the death penalty in China.\(^\text{16}\) Peru also continues to provide little remedy for violence by police and the military, in one case failing to prosecute officers who blinded a soldier in one eye by beating him with a rifle.\(^\text{17}\)

Peru’s efforts to address human rights violations are hampered by continuing corruption and by the continuing popularity and political power of politicians associated with Fujimori. Various current politicians have been accused of involvement in the Fujimori regime’s corruption and, in fact, one of the commissioners investigating Montesinos was forced to step down after a Vladivideo emerged showing him accepting a bribe. Later, Peru’s President, Pablo Kuczynski, became the most prominent politician to be accused in the massive Odebrecht scandal, in which the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht bribed politicians throughout Latin America to obtain lucrative government contracts.\(^\text{18}\) The military retains significant popular respect for fighting terrorism and human rights activists complain that trials of military and police officers are slow and have resulted in few convictions. Likewise, many Peruvians continue to respect Fujimori for defeating the Sendero Luminoso and fixing the economy. Once imprisoned, Fujimori consistently sought pardons and attempted to run for both the Peruvian presidency and Japanese parliament. Both Fujimori’s son, Kenji, and his daughter, Keiko, are members of the Peruvian parliament. Keiko leads the Popular Force party, wins parliamentary elections by wide margins, and narrowly lost 2011 and 2016 campaigns for the presidency.\(^\text{19}\) During her

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\(^{19}\) Mitra Taj & Marco Aquino, Peru’s Keiko Fujimori Launches New Presidential Bid, REUTERS (Dec. 4, 2015) http://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-election-idUSKBN0TO00P20151205; Dan Collyns, Keiko Fujimori Concedes Defeat to Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru Election, THE GUARDIAN (June 10, 2016)
presidential campaigns, Keiko suggested that she would pardon her father if elected, but it was Kenji who ultimately obtained a pardon for Fujimori. By late 2017, President Kuczynski was facing removal from office for accepting $782,000 from Odebrecht. Keiko supported the bid to remove her former rival for the presidency but Kenji rebelled against his sister’s leadership, leading a faction of their party to abstain and save Kuczynski from impeachment. Fujimori himself personally called members of parliament from prison, urging them to abstain from the vote to remove Kuczynski. Days later, Kuczynski pardoned Fujimori in an apparent quid-pro-quo that prompted condemnation from the U.N. and threats by Fujimori victims to file complaints with the Inter-American Court. Then, in an echo of the Vladivideos, footage surfaced showing Kuczynski supporters offering money and political influence to members of parliament if they would vote against Kuczynski’s removal from office. Kuczynski resigned and, with his presidential immunity gone, may face corruption charges. Former presidents Alejandro Toledo and Ollanta Humala are already facing charges for their role in the Odebrecht scandal. Kuczynski has been replaced by his former vice-president, Martín Vizcarra, a well-respected engineer who faces a precarious struggle for power against a parliament that is still controlled by the Fujimori siblings.

More information

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the Encyclopedia Britannica, BBC Country Profile, and the archives of New York Times articles on Peru, Alberto Fujimori, and Vladimiro Montesinos.
For information on the state history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, and military, see Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook.

For information about human rights, including all relevant treaties and legal documents, see Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.


For information on Peru’s prosecution of those abuses, see REBECCA K. ROOT’S TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN PERU (2012).