

Letter from Peru

The outgoing tide

by James Como

Peru is beguiling. Its polyphonic mixture of history, geography, and cultures are a travel writer's dream. Peruvian society, though, is also like a *quipu*—the indecipherable system of knots the Inca used as a narrative and bookkeeping device. In that light, Peru can be a nightmare for its own population. And this cloud-piercing, dirt-bound country is, again, about to do battle for its own soul.

In Peru, such battles come in waves; the amplitude may modulate but not the frequency. Now, after a ten-year crest, the country faces the inexorability of a trough. Only on June 5, when Peruvians go to the polls for the second (and last) round of presidential elections, will we know just how deep it will be. Alas, it seems that, whereas Peruvian cultural memory is long, Peruvian socio-political memory does not last for even one generation.

For the past ten years—after the defeat of a grotesque Pol Pot–like movement known as *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) and the end of the autocratic and abusive rule of Alberto Fujimori—the changes have been evolutionary and predictable, rather than merely entropic. Current technology took hold; capital arrived; civil freedoms gained considerable traction; a bustling middle class consolidated itself; an inundating migration to the big cities ended; squalid shanty towns became first titled settlements, then suburbs marked by well-stocked and crowded malls. Peru's economy became the fastest-growing in South America. Some 32 percent of the population is rated “poor,” which includes

the abjectly miserable, but that is down by over 10 percent within the last decade.

A pattern of social good health actually began in the early 1960s, with the founding of the Popular Action party and the election of its avatar, Fernando Belaunde Terry. But in 1968, just before the expiration of his term, he was spirited out of the presidential palace by a military coup. The new, land-reforming, “revolutionary” government was headed by Juan Velasco Alvarado, an admirer of Castro. In 1980, Belaunde was re-elected and had the wit to appoint two particularly capable ministers. One of these was Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK), the minister of the economy.

Then, in 1990, came a soul-battle. The novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (now a Nobelist) ran for the presidency. A former leftist, in 1981 he organized a march, joined by some 100,000 Peruvians, against a state-takeover of national banking, and a conference on market capitalism that featured Milton Friedman as its keynote speaker. In the event, he lost to a non-entity, the Nisei Alberto Fujimori, an agronomist of whom no one had ever heard.

Fujimori immediately did what he promised not to do, enact the economic “shock treatment” that Vargas Llosa had (imprudently) declared necessary. Within two years he carried out an “autogolpe,” mostly against the foot-dragging, led by *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA) in congress. The state was, however, able to wage its war against *Sendero* and (along with the police work of one Ketin Vidal, who captured its leader Abimael

Guzmán) it won—as did the economy. But depredations ensued. Before his election, Fujimori had said that what the country needed was a ten-year dictatorship, and in this, at least, he meant what he said. After rigging a new constitution and a second successive term he eventually fled the country, leaving behind his nineteen-year-old daughter, who had been serving as First Lady since 1994, to face the music. Alberto is now serving a twenty-five-year stretch, probably not far from Guzmán.

Fujimori's successor Alejandro Toledo had five good years. The economy (with PPK as the minister of finance) soared; he jailed as many Fujimoristas as he could find. In 2006, a chastened Alan García (who had won the presidency as an Aprista in 1985, only to blow it) was elected and is now completing his second term, by most measures a highly successful one. And there we have the ten good years of a cresting wave.

So whence the current strife? The answer lies in the cast of characters. PPK and Toledo both ran in the first round but did not finish high enough to be in the June 6 run-off. The candidate who finished second is Keiko *Fujimori*, the daughter left behind. She faces Ollanta Humala, who lost narrowly to García in 2006, which some attribute to the intrusion of Hugo Chávez. That's right: Humala is Chávez's man, just as Velasco was Castro's. *Plus ça change . . .*

Ollanta is the Quechua word for "warrior who sees all." Humala's father, Isaac, who groomed his son for the presidency from infancy, is old Joe Kennedy—only nuts. Mao has been Isaac's guiding light; he admires Hitler, called Guzmán "Robin Hood," suggested that homosexuals be killed, and has called for violent revolution. Ollanta, now forty-eight and married with two children, was an army officer (of course) who actually led a violent revolt against Fujimori. In 2006, he was a *sans-culotte*, a full-throated ranter. Now, owing to a makeover by some advisors to ex-Brazilian president Lula, he seems a well-dressed model of civility. He was photographed exiting the cathedral carrying rosary beads. He was advised by Ketin, and he was also endorsed by Vargas Llosa. Toledo's

people will largely vote for him, but the most recent polls show a dead heat (down from the nine by which he won the first round). He is also the butt of a joke on television, in which he becomes confused by what color shirt to wear. (He always starts with red but ends in white.)

Keiko, who is thirty-six and also married with two children, is distinguished by extraordinary poise, self-possession, and graciousness. In her first interview after the first round, she reminded viewers that she has been in public life for over fifteen years and has faced the worse abuse imaginable. She referred to the "crimes" of her father and of his administration, noted that she and Vargas Llosa have never met and that he is "talking through his wound" of having lost to her father.

She also reminded people that it was she who voluntarily turned over the evidence that led to the conviction of the diabolical Vladimiro Montesinos, the *éminence gris* behind the Fujimori regime, a man more evil than Iago. She added that she and Humala have the same goals for the people of Peru but that she "would not change the rules." The feeling in Lima is that people will vote for her—as they hold their noses.

Change in Peruvian electoral politics can be abrupt. PPK began at 3 percent, for example, but finished at almost nineteen. So instead of handicapping I share the results of my private poll. Peruvians (as long as they are not driving) are the friendliest and most forthcoming of people, especially with foreigners. The owner of a kiosk, three taxi drivers (a fourth dissented), and two shoe-shine men, all allow they will vote for Keiko.

Vargas Llosa has called Peru "absurd and unreal." In 1815, Simón Bolívar wrote in his Jamaica Letter, "There is no trust in the Americas . . . the constitutions are books, the treaties scraps of paper, the elections battles, liberty is anarchy, and life a torture." And still Peruvians do not *intuit* the essence of a *res publica* and so play with ideologies, parties, and personalities like small children with lettered blocks. Will Peruvians grow up now and think, as well as remember, long-term? More simply: will whoever wins leave office in 2016?