

FORUM Q&A: ALBERTO VERGARA ON POLITICS, PARTIES, AND THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN PERU



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In March 2018, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski **resigned** from the Peruvian presidency under the shadow of a corruption scandal after completing less than two years in office. Representing a political party that he himself founded in 2014, one of the key challenges Kuczynski faced as president was the lack of a strong, dedicated base of political support. His successor, Martin Vizcarra, plans to finish out the remainder of Kuczynski’s five-year term and has pledged not to seek reelection.

Jessica Ludwig of the International Forum for Democratic Studies spoke with Peruvian political scientist Alberto Vergara about the declining importance of structured political parties in Peru and the subsequent crisis of political representation. (This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. The views and opinions expressed within do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy.)

Jessica Ludwig: In an [article](#) for the *Journal of Democracy* July 2016 issue, you and your coauthor, Aaron Watanabe, identified a theme in Peruvian politics whereby the past several presidents, despite having helped rebuild Peruvian democracy and grow Peru's economy, have struggled to connect with the Peruvian population in meaningful ways. What would you diagnose as the root cause of this political dynamic, and how has this influenced the current political landscape in Peru today?

Alberto Vergara: Going back in history, in the 1970s, Peru had a dictatorship that damaged political parties and social organizations. Then, in the 1980s, political violence yielded devastating consequences for many political and social organizations. Next came the neoliberal reforms, which as in other Latin American countries harmed the unions and other kinds of social organizations. Ultimately, as a consequence of all this, the classic social density that helps link politicians and their policies to society was eroded in Peru in a more drastic way than in other places, and the country has still not recovered.

Since the 1990s, the lack of social-political linkages has actually been useful to leaders for managing the country. What is paradoxical is that the lack of organized political vehicles, social groups, and civil society has helped, not hindered, the economic boom of the last 15-20 years. In other Latin American countries, civil and political organizations opposed market reforms, but this did not happen in Peru. Lacking organized opposition, Peruvian presidents who were very unpopular and had only shallow roots connecting them to society were still able to make the economy grow rapidly.

However, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski is the proof that this model has reached a clear limit: being a president without a party no longer worked for him. Kuczynski did not care about being popular because the other presidents were not, and they still succeeded in governing for five years. Of course, there are mistakes that can be attributed to Kuczynski's administration, but my assessment would be that the problems were more systemic.

The system of governing without parties eroded for different reasons. One is that Kuczynski's administration was the first government that did not deliver economic

growth. For the country's establishment, political legitimacy is not as important as economic management legitimacy. In some ways, it was a perfect storm because Kuczynski had less party support, a diminished presence in different parts of the country, and a smaller support base in parliament than previous presidents. Although he reproduced several dimensions of the system that benefitted previous presidents, he was in a weaker position from the beginning. In the end, this explains why he resigned and left office.

Are there any political or institutional reforms that would help political parties in Peru reconnect with their constituents or that would encourage politicians to build political parties again?

I do not think so. Now you have an ecosystem with free agents that have learned to survive and prosper in a system without any established parties. As [Mauricio Zavaleta](#) has demonstrated, politicians have learned to play with existing informal rules, and incentives have discouraged the establishment of linkages. The result is that politicians and other influential actors have learned to conduct politics without parties. If there were a push toward the creation of parties, I believe it would be sparked by incentives from political competition, rather than top-down reforms. In Peru, where there have historically been no parties at all, Fujimorismo (the Fuerza Popular political party led by Keiko Fujimori, daughter of former Peruvian president [Alberto Fujimori](#)) seems to represent a relatively more articulated and cohesive organization. The success of Fujimorismo may represent an incentive for the formation of other political parties, or at least some sort of loose coalition.

In March 2018, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigned from the presidency after having narrowly avoided impeachment in December 2017. Did his administration repeat the same mistakes of his predecessors?

Kuczynski made the same kinds of mistakes, but in a deteriorated context. His main mistake was lacking responsiveness towards citizens, including his primary constituency. In particular, the liberal center that opposed Fujimorismo felt a sense of betrayal. Kuczynski primarily won the election because he was seen to embody the defense of democracy and the rule of law, in contrast to Fujimorismo. He framed the campaign in terms of defending democracy, the rule of law, and countering corruption, but he abandoned these objectives once he was in power. After promising to confront Fujimorismo, he instead made an arrangement with them, giving several positions to people close to the [Fuerza Popular] party. Kuczynski surrendered in the fight against Fujimorismo in an effort to govern peacefully with them because they had a majority in the congress. Yet he never convinced the Fujimoristas to cooperate with him. And

simultaneously, he lost support from the people who had voted for him in hopes he would pursue more democratic ways of governing.

Kuczynski was elected with only a narrow majority in a second-round run-off against Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of former Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori, and the Fujimorista party Fuerza Popular currently enjoys a congressional majority. What is Fujimorismo, and what are the party and its leaders' specific political aims? Why does Fujimorismo resonate with parts of the Peruvian population?

Why does Fujimorismo resonate with some people? One factor is that for some in Peru, the Fujimori government in the 1990s was a good government: it reestablished economic and political order in the country after the bankruptcy of the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the defeat of armed groups like the Shining Path.

Alberto Fujimori's legacy combined with Keiko Fujimori's qualities as a candidate and record as someone who established some basic organizational support are a second factor. Alberto Fujimori rejected having a party in the 1990s because he enjoyed the support of the army and the media. Keiko has been a decent candidate: she is smart, a hard worker, and has constructed alliances with different sorts of regional and social leaders, including leaders with links to some informal and even illegal activities.

In addition, the party has an asset that usually is not considered in the equation—it has never been in power. If Keiko Fujimori does not go into government, people will say that she hasn't yet been given an opportunity.

What the party stands for is less clear. It is a non-programmatic party. Its positions are the result of contingent alliances formed during the campaign period. When candidates need money or when the party needs organization, it makes pacts that carry political obligations. Policies therefore respond to those pacts and obligations, but do not reflect a uniform set of ideas. What really shapes Fujimorismo are the economic interests that have found a base of support in Fujimorismo, in order to protect the party's own interests.

What types of policies and direction can we expect to see from Peru's new president, Martin Vizcarra, who was Kuczynski's vice president and also served as Peru's ambassador to Canada?

I do not see any reason to think he is going to change important dynamics in the country. Fujimorismo still enjoys a majority in Peru's congress, and he will be

constrained by the ideological continuity of the mainstream perspective in Peru. I suspect that like Peru's previous presidents, Vizcarra believes GDP growth and stability are what is important. That set of priorities usually limits the opportunity for substantive reform.

If Vizcarra wants to complete his term in office, he also has to contend with the micro-interests within the Fujimorista alliance. As a result, I don't think he has much power to push for a broader agenda. Perhaps the most he can do is be the successful version of Kuczynski.

Kuczynski was the fourth former president of Peru to be implicated by the ongoing revelations about the Odebrecht/Car Wash scandal. How is Peru similar to or different from other countries in Latin America facing large-scale corruption scandals? What reforms are necessary to reduce corruption in Peru? How are other countries like Brazil reacting to their own corruption scandals, particularly in the context of this year's "supercycle" of elections around the region?

One thing common to the whole region is the economic super-cycle from about 2004–2014. Because of the commodities boom, these countries all of a sudden had a lot of money to invest in big infrastructure projects. The other factor is the institutional context—it is no coincidence that Chile and Uruguay don't have any important politicians involved in the Odebrecht scandal. Institutional settings such as an independent judiciary or efficient organizations in charge of accountability, such as the *Contraloría*, seem to matter. These kinds of institutions have clearly not been working in many countries.

That takes me to this recurrent theme of not having political parties. Politicians have to raise money for campaigns, but there are no consistent donors for political parties or their candidates, so everybody gives money directly to someone that is going to run as a candidate. Odebrecht understood immediately that that was the system, and they started to give money to many candidates. Of course, some of those candidates ended up becoming presidents.

The problem is that receiving campaign money from a donor, even if it is all cash and clearly dirty, is not technically a crime according to Peruvian election rules. It violates administrative laws regarding how campaigns should be run but is not a crime in the formal sense. Not complying with electoral rules is not the same as violating a criminal law.

In Brazil, judges uncovered what turned out to be an important mechanism of corruption that included several countries. While we want to have the rule of law and a

competent judiciary, now we have also realized that this type of revelation can really harm democracy. Some people have started to say that they were better off with the military, because in the era of Brazil's military dictatorship, they did not appear to be as big of thieves as the current leadership. On the other hand, many citizens think that only some politicians were caught, and not others. They might think it is great that at least one former president is in jail in Peru and Brazil, but they also suspect that the other politicians were not any better. On the one hand, it's great that in Latin America powerful people who committed crimes are finally going to jail, but if only one kind of powerful person starts to go to jail, it creates some doubts about how well democracy is working.